

LIVING POSITIVELY

HOW DECLARING MY HIV STATUS SAVED MY LIFE

Mashi Muchwa, also known as Producer Didi, is a renowned Ugandan music producer behind hit songs, such as *Stamina* by Eddy Kenzo, *Kaleke Kasome* by Maurice Hasa and *My Miss* by Coco Finger. Last year, he publicly revealed that he is living with HIV. Didi says his decision to disclose his status was meant to raise awareness and remind the public that HIV is still affecting young people. **David Lukiiza** spoke to him.

Who is Didi?

I was born in 1982 in Masindi district to the late Robert Kiiza and Nancy Kabohomboza, who were living in Masindi at the time. My father passed away when I was still a young boy and I grew up with my uncle and stepmother. I have one younger sibling.

My stepmother had seven biological children, yet she was the most loving and caring stepmother I have ever known. Before she bought anything new for her own children, she made sure I received mine first. I was treated as their favourite child and I felt deeply loved.

Where did you go to school?

I attended several schools, including Masindi Public School and Singo Army Barracks Primary School in Nakaseke district, where I sat for my Primary Leaving Examinations. For O'level, I studied at Academy Secondary School, Excel Secondary School, and later Progressive Secondary School in Bweyogerere, where I completed my Senior Four.

You recently declared your

WHY YOUNG PEOPLE ARE VULNERABLE

According to Dr Nelson Musoba, the director general of the Uganda AIDS Commission, gaps in knowledge about HIV transmission – combined with the specific vulnerabilities faced by young women – continue to drive infections among this age group.

Uganda's national HIV prevalence currently stands at 4.9%. While progress has been made, with new infections declining from 94,000 in 2010 to 37,000 in 2024 and AIDS-related deaths dropping from 54,000 to 20,000 over the same period, the burden remains significant. An estimated 1.5 million Ugandans are living with HIV and about 1.3 million of them are on antiretroviral therapy.

HIV status. How has this revelation affected you?

Before I declared my status, life was falling apart very fast. The moment I openly declared that I was HIV positive, healing began. To me, every day is a new opportunity to grow stronger and give hope to people who feel there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

At what point did you feel you needed to come out about your status, knowing it's not easy?

The moment the doctors told me I was HIV positive, I knew I wanted the public to know. I believed life had to continue after that moment, so the same day I received my results was the same day I told the world.

How did you prepare your mind?

I don't think I needed special preparation. I felt the need to release the pain by speaking out loudly. That helped silence the inner voices that pushed me to stay quiet – voices that could have led to infecting innocent lives.

Did you go with friends to the hospital for testing?

Yes, I went with several producers and artists. After the diagnosis,

I showed them my result slip. There was nothing to hide. Although they advised me not to make it public, I insisted that the world needed to know.

Did this lead to any mental health challenges?

Yes, the public announcement came with many challenges. You learn how to lose friends, survive on your own and adapt to a new life. However, determination is key. You have to stay strong and keep moving forward because life must go on.

Did your routine change in any way?

I remained positive and did not allow myself to become disorganised. Sharing my status openly through the media became the best form of healing therapy for me.

How have you dealt with pressure from the public?

I don't feel pressured by public opinion because everyone has a right to speak their mind. People will always say what they want and life goes on. I believe that coming out as someone living with HIV is not the real challenge; the real issue is how you choose to live your life afterwards.

What has been your reality ever since?

I have chosen to embrace life as it is and not drive myself crazy by overthinking. I take my medication on time, I read and I focus on producing good music.

Did you face any challenges with family in terms of stigma?

Stigma exists everywhere. The way I fight it is by refusing to dwell on thoughts that invite it. For example, constantly thinking about

RIISING NUMBERS

According to the 2025 National HIV Estimates Report, Uganda recorded 37,000 new HIV infections in 2024. Young people aged 15-24 accounted for 14,000 of these cases (45%). Adolescent girls made up the majority, contributing 11,000 infections (78%), compared to 3,000 (20%) among boys. This means four out of five newly infected young people are girls and young women.

This pattern reflects wider trends in eastern and southern Africa, where adolescent girls and young women are three times more likely to acquire HIV than their male peers. UNAIDS data shows that across Africa, 3,100 girls and young women are infected every week. Globally, 210,000 young women aged 15-24 acquired HIV in 2023, with 77% of these infections occurring in sub-Saharan Africa.

Uganda also recorded 20,000 AIDS-related deaths in 2024. Of these, 1,800 occurred among young people aged 15-24, including 1,100 adolescents aged 10-19 and 100 children aged 0-9.

people who no longer talk to you. I decided not to give such thoughts space in my life. Even when someone says something hurtful to my face, I behave as though they are not referring to me.

Did your career get affected in any way?

Yes, my career was affected. I haven't been working because I have been in rehabilitation, but I am recovering well and I am back to producing music.

Any advice to the youth who may be affected by HIV?

To those living with HIV, I encourage you to stay strong and follow your doctors' guidance. To those who are HIV negative, be careful with your lives, but also be prepared to face challenges if they come. Never think of revenge at any point – choose life, strength and hope.

Producer Didi