

## PMTCT Human Interest Story

### PREGNANT, HIV POSITIVE AND DENYING IT ALL

*In a small village called Vreed-en-hoop on the West Coast of Demerara in Guyana lives a mother and her two children, with a story she easily tell. A story that seems unbelievable, but it's true. This is the story of 32 year old Elizabeth Boodoo.*

**Edited by: Leslyn Thompson**

Elizabeth is HIV positive, a fact she acknowledges, but deep in her heart, she denies it all. She doesn't understand her situation, doesn't understand her HIV status but acknowledges that life has changed for her.

Living in a one room shack with one bed, her two children and a boyfriend, the slim pale looking woman is also pregnant with her fourth child. Her third child, died after a premature birth but that doesn't bother her much. She is more concerned about her two young sons and the life she wants for them since she might not be around to see them enter into adulthood. It was exactly two years ago that Elizabeth found out that she was HIV positive and ever since then she has been trying to come to grips with that realization.

Reflecting on her childhood, Elizabeth recalls a tough life, *"My father left when we were very small and my mother had to take of us – five children all by herself,"* she said. They received very little help from so she was forced to drop out from school. *"On some days, we had nothing to eat, nothing to drink. Mom would give us some sugar and water and that was a meal, that was as good as it got on some days".*

By the time she was in her late teens, Elizabeth had found a job in the city and met her first boyfriend., *"I thought he was going to be the one"*, she said with a smile.

She soon became pregnant with her first child, but the abusive relationship just after the baby was born, *"he start to cuss me up, wanted to hit me and it was always a problem or another, so I knew I had to move on with my life.*

Moving on with that life was not as easy as she was hoping it would have been. Her ex-boyfriend did not take much care of his new son and she turned to her mother for help. *"My mom was always there even when the other family members turned their backs on us, she was there to help me out all the time and I thank her for that"*, Elizabeth said.

A few years later, Elizabeth was pregnant again after meeting someone else and this was the start of another rocky relationship and the change in her life. Elizabeth said “*during my pregnancy with my second son, I joined the clinic and they told me about the HIV programme and so I decided to go along and have the test. “It was then that they told me I am HIV positive, but I wasn’t feeling sick, I don’t feel sick, and I am taking care of myself”*”, she recalled.

“I know he had to be the person who gave me this HIV thing. We lived in a three bedroom house and sometimes he would bring in other women. I was in one room, and they would be in another room, and there were different women, not just one. I never use to take it on at first, but it got to me after a while and I would go out anytime they come in”, Elizabeth recalled.

### **PMTCT Programme at Work, but...**

This was all happening during Elizabeth’s pregnancy. Never the less, she had joined the PMTCT clinic at the West Demerara Hospital where she received advice, counseling and much needed and medication. She eventually delivered a baby boy, who is now two years old and negative.

Even though things were bad, Elizabeth remained there and soon became pregnant again. By the time she gave birth to a premature baby girl, her relationship was at an all time low with her boyfriend who did not know her status. “Many days me and the two boys would be left without anything to eat,” she recalls. “They would wake up hungry and go to bed hungry.”

Things became so bad at one stage, that Elizabeth began selling the milk she received from the clinic for her second son, just so she would have money to buy something for her older son to eat. Eventually the baby girl died and Elizabeth moved on into another relationship.

Together with her new partner, they built a small shack and moved in. Elizabeth is well aware of her HIV status, but has never told her boyfriend anything about it simply because “*I don’t get sick, I never get sick so I aint even know if I get anything”*”.

Now, pregnant with another child, Elizabeth Boodoo is not fearful at all. She has enrolled in the PMTCT Clinic, receives advice and counseling from Sis Persis Halley a health worker from the UNICEF/Ministry of Health PMTCT Programme, but continues to deceive her partner. She will give birth in two month’s time and is currently seeking help from the government to assist her with her family. Her boyfriend still does not know of her status and she doesn’t plan to tell him anytime soon and puts it simply that “*I aint feeling sick, I happy and want to enjoy that happiness”*”.

## **PMTCT Programme In Guyana**

*Guyana is one of the countries most affected by HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean with a HIV prevalence rate in the ante-natal settings estimated between 2-3%.*

*The Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT) program started in 2001 with 11 sites in 2 of the 10 regions in Guyana -eight (8) sites in antenatal clinics and 3 in public hospitals. By the end of August 2006 there were 75 sites in 9 Regions- 59 in ante-natal clinics and 17 in hospitals, including 2 private hospitals. By the end of 1995 some 93 % of all pregnant women were accessing antenatal care. That private hospitals are involved in this program is a great achievement for public-private sector collaboration.*

*The program is also able to provide psychosocial support and nutritious enhancement diets to families. An additional feature of the program is that, it is now providing Rapid Testing on the Labour Wards of the hospitals where there are the highest number of deliveries.*

*The PMTCT Program, despite its success, faces some challenges such as stigma and discrimination shown to clients and this impacts on people being reluctant to disclose their status and follow through on care and support. However this is being addressed by the Behavior Communication Change (BCC) campaigns. Getting male partners involved in ante-natal care is a big problem but is nevertheless being addressed. There is a shortage of health personnel due to migration and having regard to the very difficult terrain, access to "hard to reach" communities in the isolated areas of the country is proving a challenge.*

*HIV treatment in Guyana is free.*