



DANIEL ONGAYI IN FRONT OF ONE OF HIS ROCK PAINTINGS THAT STATES "SAY NO TO AIDS"

Daniel Ongayi

AIDS Activist, Kenya

LARGE, MAJESTIC BOULDERS line either side of the rutted dirt road that passes through the village of Ibwona in western Kenya. Villagers often climb to the top of those easily scalable rocks to see the world from a different height. But Daniel Ongayi saw the boulders serving another purpose—as his own personal canvas.

A canvas of rock to fight AIDS.

In white paint, he wrote messages on the boulders lining over a mile of road: "Stress is a Killer," "AIDS has entered into the beds like bedbugs," "Give HIV-Positive Person an Opportunity, not Sympathy," and "Girls: Avoid Vitamin M"—M standing for the money older men give girls for sexual favors.

He drew animals as well: hippos, giraffes, crocodiles, and birds. On several of the boulders, he signed his work, boldly and with a hint of humor:

written by John Donnelly
photographs by Dominic Chavez

“I panicked. I felt my whole family would die. I built a myself, my wife, and our five children.”



“By Dan-HIV Man.”

Then, to make sure people would have no trouble finding him, he painted his cell phone number on boulder after boulder.

“I did it because people should be aware that AIDS is all around them,” Ongayi said on one recent afternoon by his boulders. “I did it so that people wouldn’t be afraid to tell others about their status.”

He stood among the boulders at a local gathering spot. More than a dozen villagers sat on the huge rocks, waiting for taxi vans. One by one, people walked by on a path that leads to one section of the village and on into a forested area. A few walked over to him to say hello. Some said he had affected the lives of everyone in the village, which has an estimated population of 20,000. In the AIDS world, the village has become a rare place where most people not only know their status but are not afraid to talk about it.

“At first, people looked at him like he was not

normal,” said Haddah Otwoma, 26, a university student majoring in information science. “But we found out that he’s OK. Because of him, people are coming out and talking about their status. It’s a very good thing.”

Ongayi walked over to show the drawings of animals on the rocks. Each, he said, has a meaning.

The hippo: “It’s a huge animal that stays underwater, in mud, during the day. It walks out only at night, the better to hide itself—just like a person with AIDS who hides their status.”

The giraffe: “It is tall and brave. When you use ARVs [antiretroviral medicine], you slowly stand on your feet again. ARVs make you stand tall like a giraffe.”

The skull of a crocodile: “It means if you play with AIDS, it will not spare you. Just like if you go into the water, the crocodile will eat you.”

Ongayi, 47, the father of five children, first tested positive for HIV in 1994. He hasn’t limited his AIDS work to boulder art. He also helped form the ANDEKA Association, a support group for men infected with the virus.

Two of his friends hopped out of a taxi van. “This one is positive living,” Ongayi said. “And that one with the white cap, he is positive living, too.”

Harrison Omuka, 52, the man in the white cap, greeted him. “We are free,” he said. “It is not a big deal to say you’re positive—not in this village. By coming out, it’s a kind of medicine of its own. You don’t have to hide.”

huge grave by the side of my house—big enough for

Q&A

**WITH
DANIEL ONGAYI**

Q: Was it always so easy for you to talk about your HIV status?

What happened after you learned you had HIV?

“I was a driver. You know how drivers act. I had a girlfriend in another place. My girlfriend, it turns out, was positive. So I caught the disease. When I told my wife, she wanted to leave me. But she just prayed to God and found peace. I was very fortunate. She decided not to leave me.”

Q: How did the rest of your family react?

“I remember that my mother cooked some tea for me. I told her and the rest of my family. And after I finished the tea, my brother took the cup I was using and threw it into the pit latrine. I started feeling I could die at any moment. I panicked. I felt my whole family would die. I built a huge grave by the side of my house—big enough for myself, my wife, and our five children. I also decided they shouldn’t spend money on my coffin, that I should build my own. I did that. I built it and I put it under the bed.”

Q: You slept over your coffin?

“For six years.”

Q: Then what happened?

“I started on ARVs. It was 2002. My CD4 count was 140. I improved almost immediately, and I destroyed the coffin.”

Q: How did people react to you initially when you starting writing and drawing on the boulders?

“Most of the people here said that I was using witchcraft. That I was a witch. But I told them, ‘No, we are trying to disseminate practical information about AIDS.’ I told them that if I could do this writing on stones, I would be trying to call people together. I would be using common sense—let people know about the disease, tell everyone that it’s OK to say you have it.”

Q: What will be the biggest challenges for people living with HIV in the years ahead?

“The medicine is there for us now. But more and more people will need basic things—food, shelter, access to water, money for transport. Right now, I myself cannot send two of my children to secondary school because I do not have the money for school fees. Sometimes I get really depressed—not because of my HIV status, but because it’s so hard to earn a living.”