

Roswitha Mushova-Ndumba

A woman of courage

By Elizabeth IKhaxas



Roswitha visiting the Sister Namibia office in 2007

Aids activist and founder of Kavango Bridges of Hope, Roswitha Mushova-Ndumba, passed away in February after a long struggle with the disease. Roswitha shared her life story with *Sister Namibia* and Women's Leadership Centre, featuring on the cover of the May 2007 issue of the magazine and in the WLC anthology *We must choose life*.

Born in 1961 and raised in Shighuru village, Roswitha fondly remembered her happy childhood spent with her friends along the Kavango River. Looking after her younger siblings saved her from early marriage, and she later stayed with missionaries of the NG church and with their help completed standard 5 in 1978.

A dedicated student who was always top of her class, Roswitha received a bursary from the Roman Catholic Church to study early childhood education at Dóbra College near Windhoek. She returned to Kavango Region in 1982 to begin her teaching career, during which she founded a kindergarten, taught at secondary schools, and built up the Martin Ndumba Combined School for San children at the former South African army base as its acting principal.

Roswitha married in 1990, but left when her husband took a second wife some years later, after she had become seriously ill. She tested HIV-positive, but with strong support from her family she was able to

start taking anti-retroviral medicine and regain her health. She formed a support group of HIV-positive people in Rundu, the Kavango Bridges of Hope, and the group began working on projects including home based care training, counselling, and awareness raising.

Roswitha attended workshops on women's rights given by the Women's Leadership Centre, developing skills in writing and photography. One of her stories is included below. She used her voice to challenge harmful cultural practices that expose women and girls to HIV, and called for outreach programmes for women in rural areas.

My cousin fainted

by Roswitha Ndumba

This is the story of a cousin of mine who had problems with his wife. They used to quarrel all the time even though they didn't know why. One day while they were arguing, the wife told the husband that she was going to divorce him because one of his girlfriends had passed away.

My cousin came to see me at the Kavango Bridges of Hope to complain about his wife. I asked him whether it was true that his girlfriend had died of Aids, but he said he didn't know. I advised him to go for the test. At first he didn't want to but later he agreed. He was afraid he would collapse with shock when he got the results.

After he had the test done he had to wait two days for the results. The waiting was very difficult for him. He was worried that he might be positive and that his wife would divorce him. She was a teacher and he was a taxi driver, but his wife owned the car. So he had the fear of having the virus, the fear of getting the results, and the fear that his wife would leave him and he would lose his livelihood, his wife's car!

When he went back to the clinic, the doctor gave him some counselling. My cousin asked for water to drink because he was shivering and sweating so much. Everybody could see that he was sick with anxiety. When he finally got the results he fainted – just like that. He didn't even listen properly to the doctor or see the paper. He thought that he was positive. His friend who had accompanied him opened the forms just to make sure. He asked my cousin what the problem was because the results were negative!

My cousin came to show me the results and told me he would promise his wife that he would carry a packet of 12 condoms everywhere he went. I told him he must stop sleeping around even with condoms because condoms can burst...!

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