

# It's the unwrapped gift that no one wants to get

## 'We were young and reckless too, now we have HIV'

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**Y**OUNG people have been warned to exercise caution while having a good time this festive season. As they look forward to the festivities, a 24-year-old HIV-positive man is appealing to his peers to practise safe sex and not to act irresponsibly.

"Take care of yourselves, travel in groups. It is safer than being alone," says Mongezi Sosibo from Newtown, Joburg.

"Also, always use a condom."

Sosibo says December is often a time when young people experiment, trying things for the first time, including taking drugs or alcohol and having sex.

Interviewed in his flat, he recalls his past with regret.

Sosibo says young people should have fun, but within reasonable limits.

"In December we switch off our reasoning and our judgement changes. We take risks when we are drinking.

"Young people need to be mindful because one day they may wake up and find that they have made the worst mistake."

Sosibo was in Grade 12 when he was diagnosed with HIV. He was 20.

He says he led a reckless, care-free life with no boundaries.

Like many young people, he didn't think he would end up with HIV.

He was 16 when he had sex for the first time.

"I was living for the moment and not the future. I never thought I would get HIV, I thought I was immune."

For years he slept around without stopping to think about the possible consequences, Sosibo says.

He started drinking and became more reckless.

"I got addicted to alcohol, we partied all the time.

"My friends and I got carried away



**'TOOK RISKS':** Mongezi Sosibo was diagnosed with HIV when he was 20 and in Grade 12. Now he warns other young people to realise they could also contract HIV and encourages them to practise safe sex.

PICTURE: DUMISANI SIBEKO

and forgot about taking responsibility. We were not making sound decisions and we just didn't care."

In Uganda, a country with high HIV infection rates, Bishop Reuben Kisembo Amooti has been quoted as saying the reason HIV remains prevalent among young people is that they are not changing their lifestyles.

He says many people go astray during the festive season and forget their values. Young people need to keep

their virginity, he argues.

In South Africa, the latest National HIV Prevalence, Incidence and Behaviour Survey by the Human Sciences Research Council has found a slight decline in the prevalence of HIV among people aged between 15 and 24, from 8.7 percent in 2008 to 7.3 percent in 2012.

The percentage could be reduced further if young people took better care of themselves, according to

Sosibo.

Justice Edwin Cameron of the Constitutional Court, who has had HIV for 30 years, agrees that young people can easily become reckless.

He was a lawyer when he was diagnosed at 32.

He says it will take decades to change the sexual behaviour of young people so they become more responsible.

Most young people are in denial about the possibility of their contracting HIV, Justice Cameron says.

"I say this with humble knowledge of myself. When I became infected with HIV in 1985, I was a young lawyer, fully aware of HIV. I thought it wouldn't happen to me. It did."

Cameron says it is easy for people to criticise young people for acting irresponsibly, whereas responsible behaviour is a long-term project and requires a lot of discipline.

"I get grumpy with people who ask me, 'Why don't youngsters just use condoms? It's so easy'."

But it's not easy, he says. "It requires constant self-love, self-regard and concern for protecting others."

Sosibo and Justice Cameron believe one of the ways to address HIV in young people is to focus on the awareness campaigns that speak to their behaviour, as changing one's behaviour won't be achieved overnight.

Dr Sue Goldstein, of the Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication, says massive funding cuts have made it harder for the organisation to do its work.

"We have shown over years that those who access our materials and programmes are more likely to behave in a safer way than those who do not," she said.

"It is a pity that the powers that be don't understand the issue of reinforcing positive behaviour and have withdrawn most funding for high-level campaigns."