

Transcripts: U.S. Ambassador, Zim youth celebrities undergo HIV tests to mark World AIDS Day

Harare, December 1, 2010: To commemorate World AIDS Day and encourage young people to know their HIV status, the U.S. Embassy and PSI's New Africa House HIV centre organized HIV testing for Ambassador Charles Ray and seven youth celebrities- Big Brother contestant and 'Lobola' star Munyaradzi Chidzonga, musicians Alexio Kawara and Edith Katiji; Premier League soccer players Norman Maroto (Gunners Football Club), Washington Arubi and Desmond Maringwa (both of Dynamos Football Club); and television personality, Rumbidzai Mugwira. The eight underwent counseling sessions observed by members of the media, and tested along with H-Metro journalist, Melody Gwenyambira. Below are transcripts of the remarks by Ambassador Ray and some of the celebrities after the test, as well as a collage of images.

Charles A. Ray (U.S. Ambassador to Zimbabwe): It has been a great pleasure, even getting my thumb pricked, this morning, doing something that is both terribly intimate and openly universal — taking an HIV test. As I said to some of you, this is not my first HIV test, but I am happy to say that this was the least painful one that I have ever had to take. Usually, as a U.S. government employee, a complete blood screening is part of our in service physical examination, which means getting into your arm and taking a gallon of blood (laughter).



The U.S. government theme for World AIDS Day 2010 is “Building on Success.” Despite the ever-present challenges inherent in fighting HIV/AIDS, there have been some tremendous successes in the last five years of the HIV/AIDS battle in Zimbabwe. Some of these successes are now starting to filter down in the form of targeted efforts to educate, protect and assist specific groups. By reaching certain target groups in effective ways, we hope to double our successes. Therefore, here in Zimbabwe, we decided this year to focus on youth; and we created our own slogan,

“Take control of your future – take control of your health – know your status.”

While I do feel young at heart, I am comfortably into my “wise” years now. And, my staff will tell you, I like to share my wisdom. But as we all know in today's world, wise older folks are not always listened to or followed by the younger generation. Sometimes they selectively choose who to listen to and what to hear. So I thought it would be wise to invite a group of young popular Zimbabweans to join me in this testing event today. I would like to thank Gaza, Washington, Norman, Munya, Edith, Rumbi and Alexio for joining me here today. All of you are all leaders in your respective career fields. Young people really look up to you and listen to what you say. This is a blessing and a great responsibility. What you have done here today by taking an HIV test is to show your fans and fellow Zimbabweans that this is an important step we all should take in our lives.

Together, my new friends and I want to send a very powerful message to the youth of Zimbabwe, and that message is – you do have power over your future and that includes your health. Know your HIV status; know your health care options; live a long, strong, healthy life.

Medical testing with celebrities was not covered in my Ambassadorial Seminar or any other diplomatic training I have had in my career. But these types of events are among the most important things I do as the chief representative of President Obama in Zimbabwe. Anything focusing on this

country's youth -- especially regarding their health and well-being -- helps to build the foundation for a brighter future for the entire country. And that is what the United States wants in Zimbabwe -- a brighter future for the entire country. Thank you.

Edith Katiji (musician, stage name Edith we Utonga): I did it! It takes us the young ones, the role models, to set an example, to set the pace...so it takes we the young generation to do this. And I am sure when they read about it in the papers or see it in the news, they might just have a little bit of courage to come and get tested. The norm is coming here and getting tested and waiting for the 15 minutes is hell. In the sort of life that we are living- I was listening to the radio the other day- children as early as 12 are getting sexually active. What does it say about our next generation or the youth that we have? It might happen due to peer pressure, it might happen through abuse, but what is important is for you to know your status because then you are able to make the decision as to where and how you are going to live your life, how you are going to take care of yourself, or how you are going to plan for what's ahead. For my fellow colleagues, thank you very much for doing this.

Desmond Maringwa (midfielder with Dynamos Football Club and President of the Footballers Union of Zimbabwe): I am used to dribbling. Today, I dribbled well enough -- I have dribbled so much in my life. I think to every Zimbabwean, and every footballer that is around in the country, they see something like light at the end of the day. I have had 15 years of playing football and I have never



done this before, and in 15 minutes, hey (laughter) but it was nice. I really enjoyed the moment, I enjoyed everything.

I am the President of the Footballers Union of Zimbabwe. We have got a project that we want to do about soccer players as well. We have seen so many have gone the way of HIV and died. Nobody wanted to come forward and do something like this (getting tested). Maybe I am the first one, and I am proud of myself.

I just want to say to the young guys, everybody who supports the game, who has seen us playing over

the years; to just say, this is the beginning of life, the beginning of something very new to your life. They should come every now and then, even to ask me, I will bring them here. I would want to thank the U.S. Embassy for bringing us here, and everyone from PSI and everybody who was involved in this. Thank you for bringing us here. People look up to us and this is a way forward for Zimbabwe and a new generation. Thank you

Alexio Kawara (urban grooves musician): Firstly, let me just thank the US Embassy and PSI New Start



Center for the invitation because sometimes we think about these things and don't do it. And that's the norm of the human mind, some people just think, some people do. But it is very important to act. My message is mainly to the celebrities, every celebrity in Zimbabwe. We lead the way. I know when there is a record label where one artist goes, we lead others to follow. You have heard that one before. We lead others follow.

To all the celebrities - let's lead the way. Let's show everybody this is the way life is supposed to be lived. We have mistakes and we have temptations. I think our temptations are at a higher level than the other temptations, especially in an industry where you are in the limelight and every lady wants to say something to you (laughter) and every guy

wants to say something to you and to you too. This is just work where our fans appreciate us and our work, and it's not that we are too special. To every celebrity, let's just lead the way and others will follow. Thank You.

Munyaradzi Chidzonga (Big Brother Africa All Stars finalist and 'Lobola' film star): Ladies and



gentlemen, when something like this happens, there is a tendency to think that it's something that should be intimate and people should not talk about. First of all, I would like to thank PSI for continuing to facilitate a process like this in such a dignified way. You can come here from any walk of life and be tested and be treated as somebody whose privacy is respected. I would also like to thank the U.S. Embassy for inviting me here. You know, it was not too difficult. The minute I heard HIV and AIDS, I jumped on it.

I really think as young people we need to start talking about the things that we talk about behind closed doors. This needs to be opened up because, believe it or not, in our generation, it is dangerous to have sex because there are a lot of things that could go terribly wrong. So when we are given opportunities like this to reach young people, I thank the people who have facilitated. Let's perpetuate it because knowledge is power. If you know your status you have the power to change how you want your life to be lived and change the lives of the people around you. That's a gift that you have. PSI facilitates that.

Let's change the way people think- the future generation. You guys are all celebrities- and everybody does look up to you. I love that song (*mentioned earlier by Alexio*). The power of influence is a gift from God -- I think we should use it for positive things. Seeing is believing. We have been captured here getting our blood taken and if people see you they believe. They can see and say, "OK, this is what we can do." They have seen us here, let's perpetuate the cycle and change the country. Chete.

End transcripts...

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*Standing from left: Rumbi, Amb. Ray, Edith, Alexio, Gazza.
Seated: Norman, Munya & Washington*



Ambassador Ray, Youth celebrities with PSI staff