

Miss HIV Stigma Free Pageant

Written by Robert ID959

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There is a catwalk banquet, hordes of journalists, traditional dancing and time-consuming hair styling -- but at Botswana's beauty pageant every competitor must be HIV positive.

At a palm tree-studded resort and conference center in the capital Gaborone, 12 girls are competing this weekend for the title "Miss HIV Stigma Free."

"We are saying here we are, we are HIV positive and it doesn't mean it's the end of the line," 33 year old reigning Miss HIV Kgalalelo Ntsepe told Reuters in her cluttered one room cottage, where she displays trophies of her win in 2003.

Largest global diamond producer Botswana has one of the highest HIV rates in the world with an estimated third of the population infected.

The government is using its mineral wealth to provide life prolonging anti-retroviral drugs -- but many do not know their HIV status or are unwilling to come forward for treatment. Organizers say the pageant aims to tackle that stigma.

"After I started the medicine, I became stronger and stronger," said Ntsepe, who was diagnosed in 2001.

"We are trying to say there is life with this medication. Some don't believe I'm HIV positive because I'm so healthy," she said.

AIDS groups welcome the pageant, which is sponsored by British bank Barclays. "It may just be a pageant, but it is important because it brings together people with HIV who are open about their status," said Brad Ryder, spokesman for the African Comprehensive HIV/AIDS Programme.

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"They need support, they need to come out and get acceptance for their condition."

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