

Living with Aids

IN A COUNTRY RAVAGED BY AIDS, THE COURAGE OF A SUPREME COURT APPEALS JUSTICE HAS BEEN A CAUSE FOR INSPIRATION. PHIL LUTTON MEETS EDWIN CAMERON.



By anyone's standards, Edwin Cameron is positively glowing. His handshake is firm, his skin is fresh, his suit crisp and his tie is befitting his stature as one of South Africa's highest ranking judicial officers: a Supreme Court of Appeal Justice.

When I query him on his health, he seems only too happy to fill me in, leaning back in his chair and speaking proudly of a war in which he is unlikely to triumph, but is winning so many battles that conquering the impossible seems more like a certainty than a wistful dream.

"That's a good question and I'm glad you asked," he beams. "I'm fine. I'm feeling fantastic. I've got a lot of energy and really enjoying life in so many ways."

It was, in many ways, the obvious question to ask. Still, when it comes to Aids, there is always a certain hesitation that pervades a conversation, a stigma Cameron has been crusading against since he publicly announced he was living with the disease in 1999 after becoming HIV positive in 1985. It's that stigma which he writes about in his new book, *Witness To Aids*, a deeply personal journey about living in a country that Aids has ravaged like no other, managed by a government that is only just waking from a slumber of deathly denial.

South Africa has more than five million HIV positive citizens out of a population of 50 million, making it the hardest hit of all sub-Saharan Africa, widely seen as the world's Aids troublespot. Cameron's story is, by his own admission, not typical of many South African sufferers. His wage and standing allowed him access to vital antiretroviral drugs, so long opposed by the Thabo Mbeki government and only now becoming accessible to the lower socio-economic sections of society.

BRENDON BISHOP/TNT IMAGES

"I was lucky. Access to those drugs gave me access to life. I think with that sort of feeling there is also a feeling of guilt. All of us feel guilt and long for a world where there is better health," Cameron, now 52, says.

While the Mbeki government has long been suspicious of the side effects of antiretrovirals, a proven ingredient of the drug cocktail that can combat the debilitating effects of the disease, lobbyists in South Africa, Cameron among them, have long pushed for the wide-spread distribution of the drugs.

Yet when he first found out his HIV had progressed into full-blown Aids in 1997 — a realisation that struck like a "wrecking ball" — he too was initially reluctant to commit to a course of antiretrovirals, having his own misgivings about their worth. Racked by self-denial and depression, Cameron was not only fighting the disease, but his inner demons, preferring at times to let the disease take its natural course and, inevitably, his life. Soon, however, the infections that were racking his body made the decision for him. It was a horror from which there was only one respite.

"The experience of an incapable, inefficient chest and a fungus-clogged gullet had scared me right out of further ambivalence or uncertainty. If there was a chance that the treatment would fail me, there was twice as much chance that it would succeed. What distinguished me from other Africans dying of Aids was that I had the means — though

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barely — to clutch at the near miraculous new remedy of antiretroviral treatment," he writes.

The drugs worked, and despite paying a huge financial burden that spurred his campaign to force drug companies to lower prices, the results were swift and sure. Cameron's health and demeanour improved — and with it rose his drive to raise awareness of the disease. If he were a rugby player, it would have been called his second wind.

But the physical effects of Aids, while described in close detail in the book, are a sidebar to the real conflict within South

Africa. The stigma of Aids, Cameron says, is the one fight that still has to be beaten down; the overwhelming factor retarding treatment of the tragic pandemic.

"Stigma — a social brand that marks disgrace, humiliation and rejection — remains the most ineluctable, indefinable, intractable problem in the epidemic. Stigma is perhaps the greatest dread of those who live with Aids and HIV — greater to many even than the

fear of a disfiguring, agonising and protracted death," he writes.

"Stigma manifests itself in hatred, discrimination, rejection, exclusion. Workers are sacked. Spouses are shut out. Friends are abandoned."

While an antidote for Aids continues to elude researchers, Cameron is a walking contradiction to the stigma of the illness in South Africa — one that says it is a disease afflicting only poor, rural blacks. If it can attack one of the land's highest legal figures, a Rhodes Scholar, it can permeate any level of society. The death of Nelson Mandela's son, Makgatho, from Aids in January, and Mandela's subsequent public announcement and plea to the country to combat the disease, has illuminated the shadowy spectre of Aids even further. It was, Cameron says, a huge step in the Aids war.

When writing *Witness To Aids*, Cameron says it forced him to relive some of the most perilous and soul-destroying moments of his battle with the illness, but his determination not to become a lost voice in the mire of the sub-Saharan pandemic drove him ever onwards.

"I think there was despair every day. You think, 'What difference can I make?' But it is really one person's story, an open door for people to look through. I hope its legacy is that people might be moved to constructive action."

Cameron went public about his status in 1999, during a job interview. He remains the only bearer of public office to declare he has Aids. His confession and the subsequent publishing of the book have garnered him support, not exclusion, he says.

"I am not dying of Aids. I am living



with Aids," he writes.

The phrase has caught on, and Cameron has progressed from almost giving up hope to becoming one of South Africa's foremost campaigners, even lecturing at Harvard University on the subject, where he famously derided Aids sceptics as being akin to Holocaust deniers.

Like any writer, Cameron knows his words will outlive him. But he is hoping they will inspire a new generation into action. Who better than a man described by Nelson Mandela as "one of South Africa's new heroes", a man enjoying his second wind, to breathe new life into the long fight? ■

■ *Witness To Aids* by Edwin Cameron, foreword by Nelson Mandela, is published by IB Tauris. It retails at £12.99 at www.ibtauris.com.

