

## Press Release

### Comic illustrated by Tommy Motswai ready for Deaf Awareness Week

An innovative new comic book *Are your rights respected?* has been developed by the Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA) to help reach out to the Deaf community about HIV/AIDS, sexuality, rights and empowerment. Illustrated by renowned South African artist Tommy Motswai, who is also Deaf, the comic is a groundbreaking attempt to depict real life stories of an often-unheard community, while encouraging discussion on important issues.

South Africa will celebrate Deaf Awareness Week 24-30 August. Launched at a conference organised by DEAFSA 16-18 August 2006, the comic is being distributed through DEAFSA provincial co-ordinators from across the country.

Glancing through, the reader will find very few words accompanying the vibrant images done in Motswai's unique style. The producers took painstaking efforts to use image and illustrated South African Sign Language (SASL) to communicate the storyline. This is because due to limitations in Deaf education, Deaf learners often have lower literacy abilities than their hearing counterparts.

"Comic is an ideal medium to tell a story in a fun an entertaining way, while at the same time passing along important messages and encouraging dialogue," says Neil Verlaque-Napper who managed the production of the comic, "we have created a whole new convention here, adapting this to a Deaf audience."

The comic tells the story of a group of friends at a Deaf school as they seek to learn about sexual health, and lobby for their right to information. Most importantly, they stick together, especially when their friend Dorothy is the victim of sexual abuse.

According to the Centre for Deaf Studies at the University of Witswaterstrand, Deafness is considered the single largest disability grouping in South Africa. South African Sign Language (SASL) is used as a first language by approximately 500 000 Deaf South Africans. Yet few resources are available to this community about important issues such as HIV, health and human rights.

John Meletse is the Deaf Outreach coordinator for the Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA) working in schools and with Deaf communities across the country. He explains the need for more knowledge on these issues in the schools. "One of the schools for Deaf learners informed me that they are aware of two HIV positive young Deaf learners there and asked me to continue visiting the school on a regular basis. They asked me to come and help the Deaf assistants understand HIV issues in more depth."

John knows from his own painful experience about lack of good resources and services for Deaf people. He recounts his own story of learning he was HIV positive at a clinic that did not have the resources to support him. "They did not give me any counseling which is required in South Africa. The doctor did the test and told me to wait. I was very anxious. The doctor called me back and wrote on a piece of paper in large letters 'YOU ARE HIV POSITIVE'. He put it in my face. I felt shocked and sick."

"A series of consultations and focus groups with young Deaf people helped to refine the booklet, said Ruth Morgan, the director of GALA. "Feedback has indicated a resounding success."

The comic was developed by the Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA) in collaboration with comic storytellers Neil Verlaque-Napper and Andre Croucamp, media for development company Community Media for Development, SASLINC, and a wide variety of people from the Deaf community and with experience in Deaf education materials. Funding was contributed by the Foundation for Human Rights (FHR), Atlantic Philanthropies and HIVOS.

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