

# NEWSLETTER OF THE GAY AND LESBIAN ARCHIVES OF SOUTH AFRICA (GALA) COMING OUT, AGAIN

GALA IS AN INDEPENDENT PROJECT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY ARCHIVES TRUST

**Issue 11 - March 2006**



## CELEBRATING THE LIFE OF PETER BUSSE: 1958-2006

Dear friends,

This newsletter pays tribute to the life of Peter Busse, who died on January 6, 2006. Peter was a brave and humane man, and a friend to the archives. He was one of the first people in South Africa to disclose their HIV status in public. Peter's activism offered hope and courage to many, and he was a role-model to those of us living with HIV and AIDS. For this newsletter we have taken as our theme a subject that Peter emphasised time and again in his life and work: the importance of 'coming out again' as both gay and HIV positive.

Coming Out, Again is also the title of the HIV community production that GALA launched in 2005, and which we will perform again this year. You can learn more about the play on page four. We also feature the work of talented photographer Carl Collison, whose Nine Lives exhibition explores the experience of people living with HIV and AIDS, and we feature excerpts from two interviews from our ongoing HIV and AIDS Life Story Project, with activist Jeffrey Mofokeng and our own John Meletse.

Sincerely,

**Rev. Paul Mokgethi**

Coordinator GALA HIV/AIDS Project



This photograph of Peter Busse, as well as his handwritten story, are from Carl Collison's Nine Lives exhibition featured on

### GAY AND LESBIAN ARCHIVES OF SOUTH AFRICA

Historical Papers, Ground Floor, William Cullen Library,  
East Campus, University of the Witwatersrand.

P.O.Box 31719, Braamfontein, 2017

Telephone: +27 11 717 4239

(director and office), +27 11 717 1963  
(archivist).

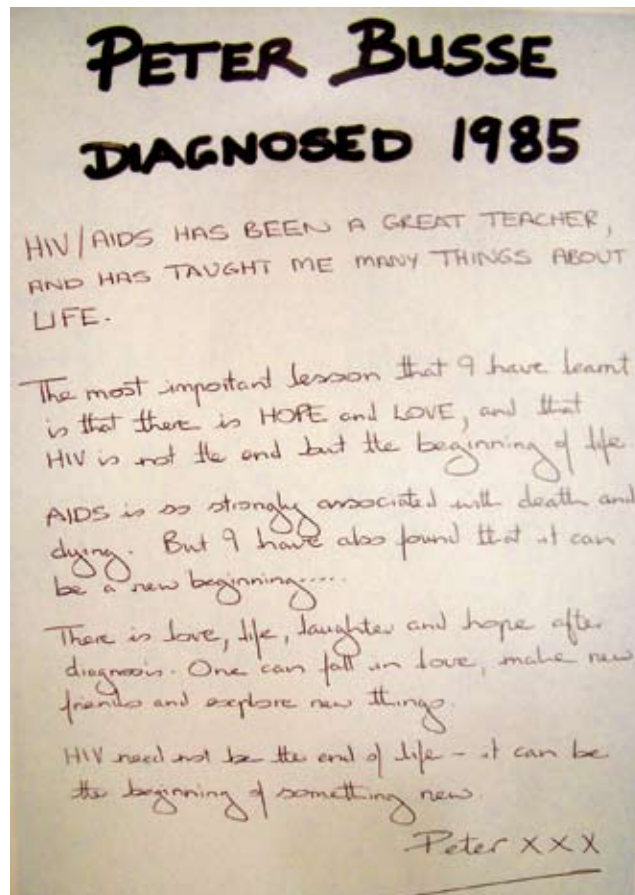
Fax: +27 11 717 1783

Email: gala@library.wits.ac.za



*"Disclosure is very important. You have to tell people what the problem is in order to get help from them. And the first step to disclosing your status is accepting the diagnosis yourself. I think I did that very quickly. I thought "It's happened. You can't go back and reverse it". The process of disclosure as a gay person and as an HIV positive person are very much the same, because in both cases you are revealing something about yourself that society doesn't like or sees as a taboo. For me, disclosure was best because I don't like presenting only parts of myself and having to hide away other parts. I am completely open and transparent."*

Peter Busse, GALA interview, 2005



*"I was diagnosed with HIV in 1985, and at that stage there was very little counselling or information available. My doctor gave me a scientifically factual talk of what the disease was. Even at that stage people didn't know a great deal about it. I think that's what made me get into HIV work myself. I didn't want people to get diagnosed in the same kind of vacuum as I did, with no support, no information and no counselling."*

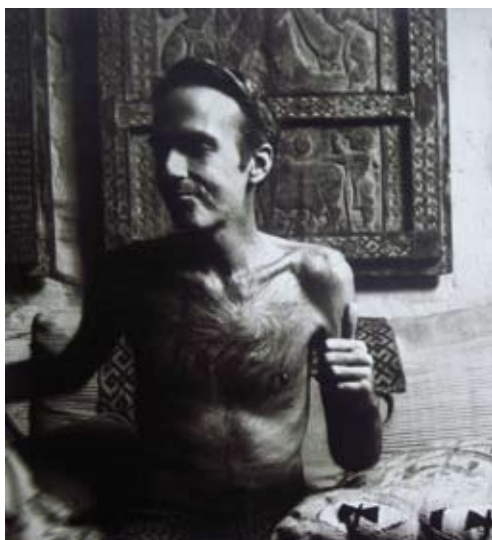
Peter Busse, GALA interview, 2005

## AN ARTIST, CARL COLLISON: NINE LIVES

Carl Collison's Nine Lives exhibition of photographs and handwritten stories documents the lives of ordinary people who happen to be HIV-positive. "I thought about the friends I had who had died of HIV/AIDS who, each in their own way, were strong, unique spirits. This led me to the idea of doing what I see as empowering shots of people living with HIV/AIDS" says Collison. "It was – and is – very humbling shooting people who, despite the odds facing them, live with such voracity."

### ADAM LEVINE

It's about six months since I was diagnosed with HIV, and I've been horribly sick. My feet are in constant pain, and my body is trying so hard to fight off a combination of AIDS, Cancer and TB. I am getting better, but I have a long way to go. There are angels all around me, caring, attentive, loving. A few friends, my parents, my doctor, the nurses at the cancer clinic. Their dedication is awesome. In other ways my life is going so well. My first book, *The Wonder Sataris* has been wonderfully received and I am getting stuck into a new book and loving researching and writing. Doors are opening. Lying here in bed I have a full life, and feel very fulfilled.



Over the months, with each scary trial, I have grown more and more convinced how very desperately I want to live, how many thrilling things I want to do. My head bursts with ideas and opportunities, my heart thumps with hope. In a strange way these spaces were empty before I got sick. I don't miss the clubs, the drugs, the fucking around. I miss going for a walk or a swim. No one tells you how hellish this sickness is to deal with. It is all wrapped up in mystery, fear and denial. We must break that. We must tackle it with honesty, passion and balls. And yes, we can win

### NUNU SIGASA

I tested positive for HIV in 1999. It was difficult for me to accept as I am a lesbian. This is my poem:

The Monster

You are a witchdoctor,  
You poison lovers' fountain of love,  
Lovers drink happiness and die,  
Lovers sleep in the bed and wake in the grave,  
Yes. You smile when doctors fail,

Hey, Monster!

Where's your sympathy,  
You kill innocent babies in the womb,  
You kill young couples and leave orphans.  
Yes. You smile when mortuaries are full,  
And celebrate when mourners shower tears.

Angeke usangithole Mr. Monster ngithi angeke!

**Carl Collison can be contacted on 076 2755420 or email him at [moneyshot@webmail.co.za](mailto:moneyshot@webmail.co.za).**

### AMELIA MAKON

My name is Amelia Makon, I'm 37 years old, and I've been a lesbian as long as I can remember.

I'm HIV positive for the last four years. I contracted HIV through being raped. The same evening I was tested. But I tested negative. About three months after the rape I started to have gynaecological problems. I was then asked to take an HIV test, which I did. And when the results came out it was reactive.

I did not understand what HIV/AIDS was at the time, because I was not given counselling before or after the test.



The first year of being reactive I started drinking heavily. I was not eating and I started losing a lot of weight. After the second year I went for an operation to remove the genital warts. I was then given a letter after some time to go to Helen Joseph Hospital in Johannesburg. There I met Sister Sue Roberts. I was then counselled and retested. My CD4 count is 577. After the counselling I then understood what HIV/AIDS is all about.

The last three years I'm doing volunteer work at Helen Joseph Hospital. I run a stress machine on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays which is sponsored by Chris Driver of Ferndale. Thanks to Sister Sue Roberts.



## PROUD TO BE OUT AS GAY AND HIV-POSITIVE: TWO STORIES FROM OUR HIV AND AIDS LIFE STORY PROJECT

### JOHN MELETSE: EMPOWERING THE DEAF COMMUNITY

*The challenges facing lesbian and gay people who are HIV positive are highlighted through the life of Deaf\*, gay activist John Meletse who works for GALA. Here John shares with us his life being HIV positive in a Deaf society, and highlights society's ignorance about people with disabilities.*

I was born profoundly deaf and I'm the only Deaf member of my family. I was the first black Deaf man to come out publicly as gay.

#### Letter informing me I was HIV

**positive:** One day I came back from work and my grandmother gave me a letter, she said some one must have put it under the door. It read " You have AIDS" I panicked and asked my grandmother who left the note but she did not have a clue. To this day I don't know who sent me that letter. It was so cruel to do that to me.

**Thoughts of being HIV positive:** Long after receiving the letter I was always tired and I didn't really know what was wrong. So I went to the local clinic but could not be assisted because they did not have a sign language interpreter. I was then referred to another doctor who also did not know sign language. He wrote me a note asking if I understood English I said yes, so we communicate that way (exchanging notes). He asked if I wanted to take an HIV test. I agreed and without any form of counseling he did the test. I had to wait for about 15 minutes for my results and then he called me into the consulting room. I was nervous, and then he wrote in big bold letters **"YOU ARE HIV POSITIVE"** and practically shoved the paper to my face. I was shocked and devastated. I asked if was true he said yes and you can go now. I went outside and sms my boss about my status, she was supportive and told me we would work through it.

**Disclosing to my pillar of strength, my grandmother:** I went home and I was just sobbing. I was deeply hurt, my life was falling into pieces. My grandmother sensed something was not right so she asked me what was bothering me. I just broke down I could not say it out. Then I finally managed to tell her she handled it so well and told me that there are lots of people living with HIV so if they can do it I can also do it. She got pamphlets and any material that had information about HIV. We learned more about the virus together and it made it easier for me to cope. She has been supportive every step of the way she is always by my side and that is really encouraging to me.

**Being Deaf, gay, now HIV positive:** I am used to discrimination. I have faced it all my life. I'm comfortable with being Deaf and gay and I have managed to deal with my HIV status. I am proud to be all this, Deaf gay and HIV positive. The biggest problem with people in the Deaf community is that we do not have role models like in the hearing community where you have your Zackie Achmats who are positively living with HIV. Regardless all of this I'm fine with who I am and I believe I have had so many obstacles in my life I can handle anything. I am trying my best to educate people in the Deaf community that HIV does affect them too and that we can also live positively with HIV.



Photo: Cedric Nunn ©J

**Educating the Deaf society about HIV:** I'm disappointed by the health department system in this country. When you go to the clinics you find sign language posters giving the impression that you one will find someone who understands sign language, then the moment you start signing the nurses or doctors go, " Hawu! Now what?" and they don't even try to understand what you are saying. They just patronize deaf people and this is so wrong. There is no educational material that is specifically targeting the Deaf community and this is not right. It's about time the health department realises that that we are also part of the community and there are Deaf people like myself who are living with HIV. Clinics should have sign language counselors and nurses. How are we supposed to communicate, with such discrimination from the government and the hearing society.

**Empowering the Deaf community:** As part of my work for GALA I do talks at Deaf schools about HIV, and I always disclose to the Deaf students that I am both gay and HIV positive. I think it is effective and I think reaching out to those students at grassroots level is important. They also find it easy to relate to me because I am Deaf, I'm one of them. The truth is people from the Deaf community do not trust people from the hearing community because they treat us differently. They make us feel as if we are not human.

\* Deaf with a capital "D" indicates cultural Deafness and the use of South African Sign Language (SASL) in the same way as people identify as Zulu.

### JEFFREY MOFOKENG: 'I THOUGHT TO BE DIAGNOSED MEANT YOU WERE GOING TO DIE!'

Here activist **Jeffrey Mofokeng** talks about his experience being diagnosed HIV positive and disclosing to family and friends.

**Experience of being tested:** I was staying in Germiston at the time I was diagnosed. I wanted to know my status because I had in the past had sex without using condoms, and that being the case I knew it was possible I might have been infected. But I did not have any physical signs of being HIV positive before going to be tested. I decided to go to the local clinic for the HIV test, where I met with a lady counselor who tested me and gave me pre and post counseling. That's how I learned I was HIV positive. At that time I did not know much about HIV, and I thought that to be diagnosed meant that you were going to die! The counselor really helped me to understand that HIV is not a death sentence. But I couldn't speak to her about my gay relationships, as I felt she was going to be judgmental. I felt really lost the day I was diagnosed, that my life was doomed, and that I might kill myself. The most important thing for young people struggling to decide whether to go for an HIV test or not is to gather the information first.

**Disclosing to family and friends:** The first person that I told when I tested positive was my aunt. I told her the same day when I came back from getting my results. She did not believe me, because I was not sick. She thought a person who is HIV positive was someone very skinny. But I explained everything to her, and she understood. My HIV status was not something I could keep it to myself. I am very open about it, and being open has helped me to gain more information about the illness, and to get the help I

need from family and friends. I have also met other people who are HIV positive. Now I realize that there is still a chance for me to live my life! One positive thing about this experience is that I can now relate to my family about any issue.

**Living positively:** Sometimes there are uncertainties in living with HIV, but I try to maintain a positive mental attitude. I've realized that when I talk about my status I feel a sense of relief. That on its own helps me quite a lot. I also try to eat a balanced diet, even though at times it's a little difficult. I am not on treatment at the moment because my CD4 count is high and I do not need medication as yet. I'm lucky in that I have never been really sick. But I think my family and colleagues will be there for me if I do fall ill. They are care givers where I come from.

**Community support:** Nobody deserves to be HIV positive. It is not a punishment from God, but a disease that can affect and infect anyone whether you are black, white, gay or straight. My church has been very supportive of me as someone who is openly HIV positive. My minister is someone who understands and gives me courage and support. Everyone knows my status and they have accepted me. This has been a positive thing in my life.

**COMING OUT, AGAIN: Stories of living positively in the LGBTI community** *By Tonya Graham*

"What should I wear to the party?" "Will I meet someone sexy?" "How do I tell them I'm positive?"

Coming Out Again examines issues around HIV and disclosure in the LGBTI community. This community based play, produced by GALA, is told from the perspectives of seven young lesbians and gay men and comes from their own lives and experiences.

South Africa has one of the highest HIV prevalence rates in the world, but homophobia has complicated how the LGBTI community here copes with the pandemic. This community has been largely absent from public campaigns to raise awareness and reduce stigma. LGBTI people often face ignorance and homophobia from medical staff and social workers, and this discourages them from seeking help.

Coming Out Again was initiated by GALA to raise awareness of HIV and AIDS within the LGBTI community, as well as to raise LGBTI issues within South Africa.

The production shares the cast members' own stories in order to reach the community in an honest but entertaining way. The storyline centres around seven people getting ready for a house party to celebrate Pride week, and during their preparations cast members reveal their stories from visiting a gay darkroom to the pain of losing a lover to AIDS. One unique aspect is the involvement of a Deaf cast member, John Meletse, and all performances are Sign Language interpreted.

Coming Out Again will be performed at various community and mainstream venues around South Africa in 2006. Contact Busi on (011) 717 4239 for more information



**CONTACT INFORMATION:**

Do you need information on HIV and AIDS or relevant services? Contact one of these organizations!

**OUT-LGBTI well-being**

Pretoria based organization providing health services and counseling to the LGBTI community.

Tel 012 344 5108

Helpline 012 344 6500

**Triangle Project**

Cape Town based organization providing health services and counseling to the LGBTI community.

Tel 021 448 3812

Helpline 021 422 2500

**Durban Lesbian and Gay Community Centre**

Provides health services and counseling to the LGBTI community.

Tel 031 301 2145

Helpline 031 301 2149

**Gay and Lesbian Library**

Loan books and films dealing with HIV and AIDS related issues (Johannesburg only).

Tel 083 734 6163

**National AIDS Helpline**

Free telephone counseling, information and referral for those affected and infected with HIV and AIDS. Not LGBTI specific.

Tel 0800-012-322