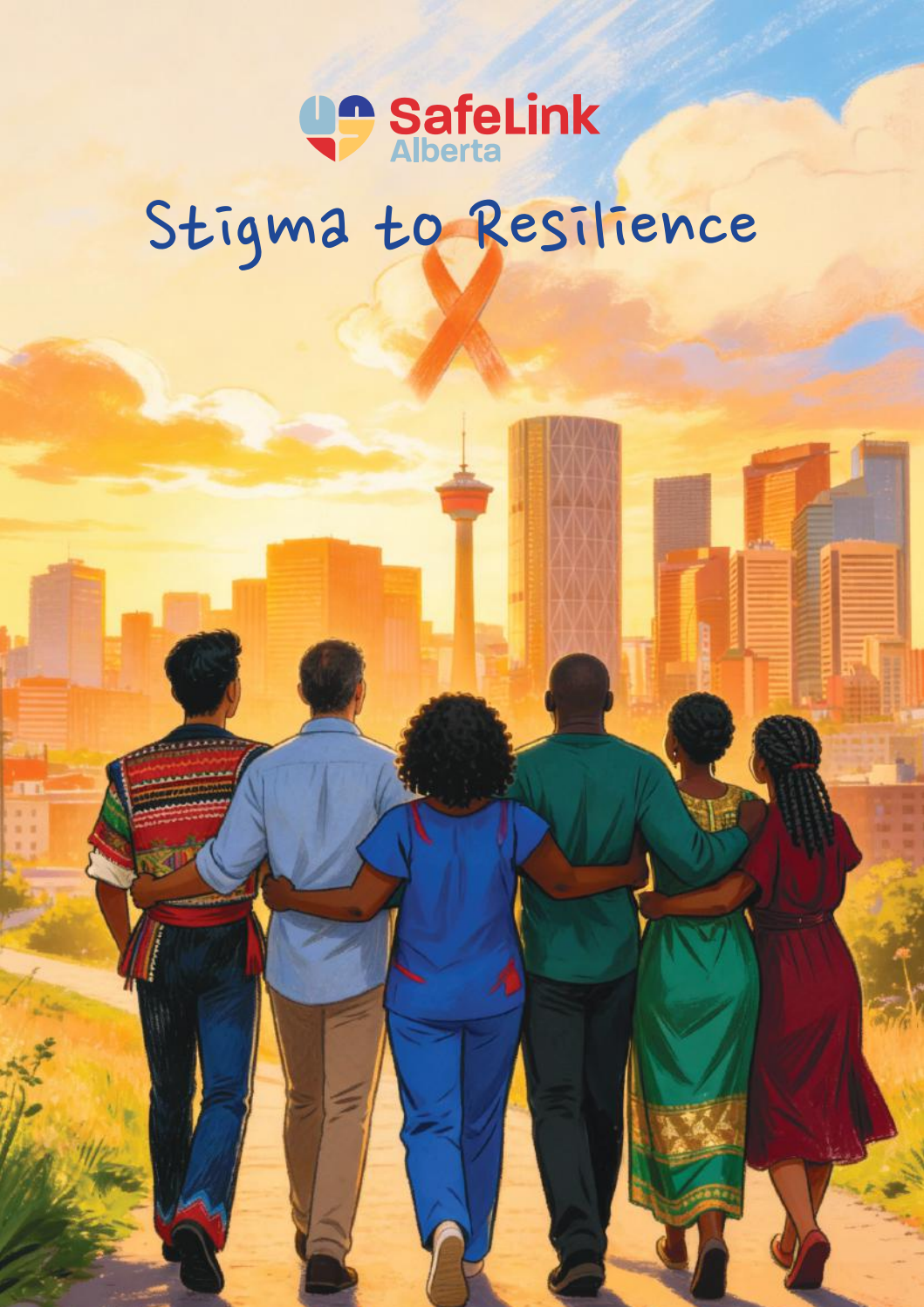




Stigma to Resilience



Stigma to Resilience
An HIV Anti-Stigma Graphic Novel by SafeLink Alberta

SafeLink Alberta would like to acknowledge and thank the brave individuals who shared their stories, pain, hope, and resilience with us. Without you, there would be no us, there would be no story to share. Know that we see you, we honor you, and we are better for knowing you. Thank you for trusting us and working with us to create something so beautiful to share with our community. We hope for a day when there is no HIV stigma, where no one lives with fear or shame. Until that day comes, and for all the days that come after, know that we are honored to walk alongside you.

Thank you.

This project was made possible through funding from the Positive Actions initiative at REACH Nexus, a research team at the MAP Centre for Urban Health Solutions at St. Michael's Hospital (Unity Health Toronto).



SafeLink Alberta is a non-profit organization serving Southern Alberta with a mission to reduce the harms associated with sexual activity and substance use. Established in 1983 as AIDS Calgary, SafeLink has been a leader in the HIV/AIDS response, continuously adapting to emerging public health priorities and the needs of communities served. Today, SafeLink Alberta provides comprehensive education, programming, and support for people affected by HIV, hepatitis C, and other sexually transmitted and bloodborne infections, working to reduce stigma and advance health equity for all.

HIV related stigma remains one of the greatest barriers to care. It continues to dramatically shape the lives of people living with HIV, especially those within marginalized communities. Stigma shows up in intimate relationships, in harmful stereotypes, and in healthcare systems that can be difficult to navigate, and is a primary factor contributing to delayed testing, reduced access to treatment and prevention services, and higher rates of new infections. More than anything, stigma impacts well-being, belonging, and the right to be seen without judgement.

This graphic novel was created to confront that stigma. Through lived stories and honest perspectives, it aims to build understanding, challenge misconceptions, and honour the strength of people living with HIV.

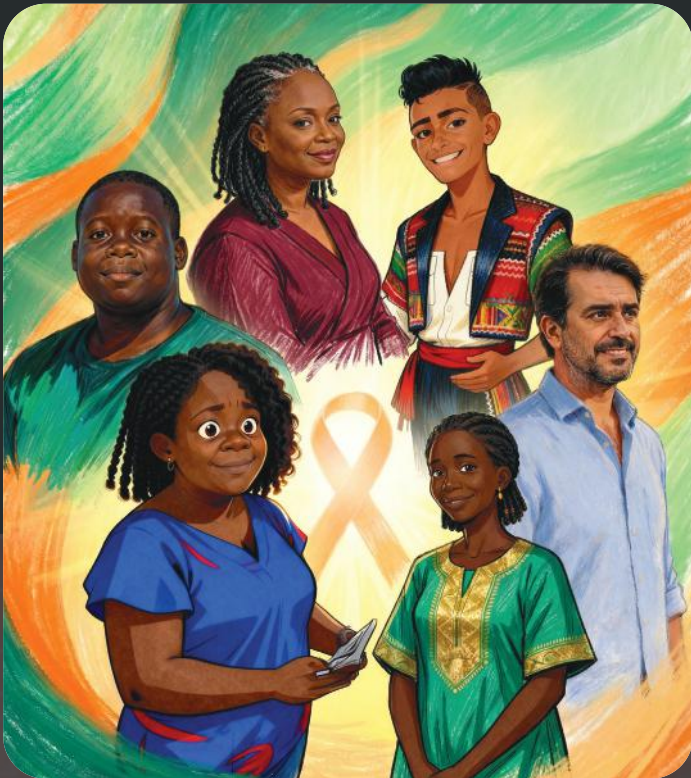
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Synopsis

Stigma to Resilience is a linear graphic novel that brings together five powerful stories of people living with HIV. From Peru, Nigeria, Uganda, the Middle East, and Canada, each chapter explores the challenges of stigma, the pain of silence, and the courage to embrace resilience. Through these voices, the novel transforms narratives of shame into stories of strength, reminding us that living with HIV is not the end, it is the beginning of living fully and freely.



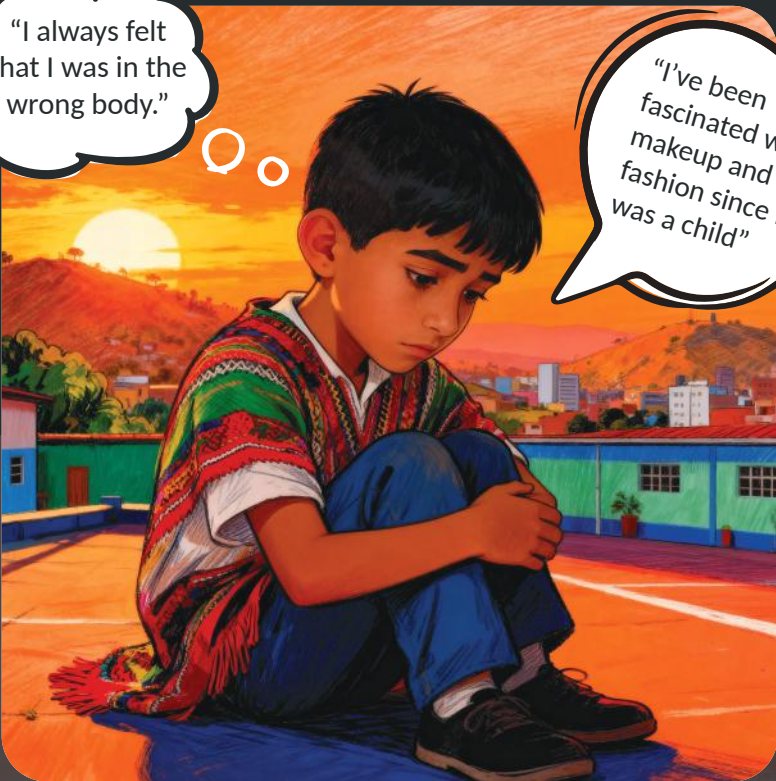
JULES' STORY

An unexpected Journey

Jules grew up in Lima, Peru, navigating childhood with a heart full of creativity and a body that never felt like home. From a young age, he felt different. While other boys played soccer, Jules was drawn to makeup, fashion, and the vibrant colours of self-expression.

"I always felt that I was in the wrong body."

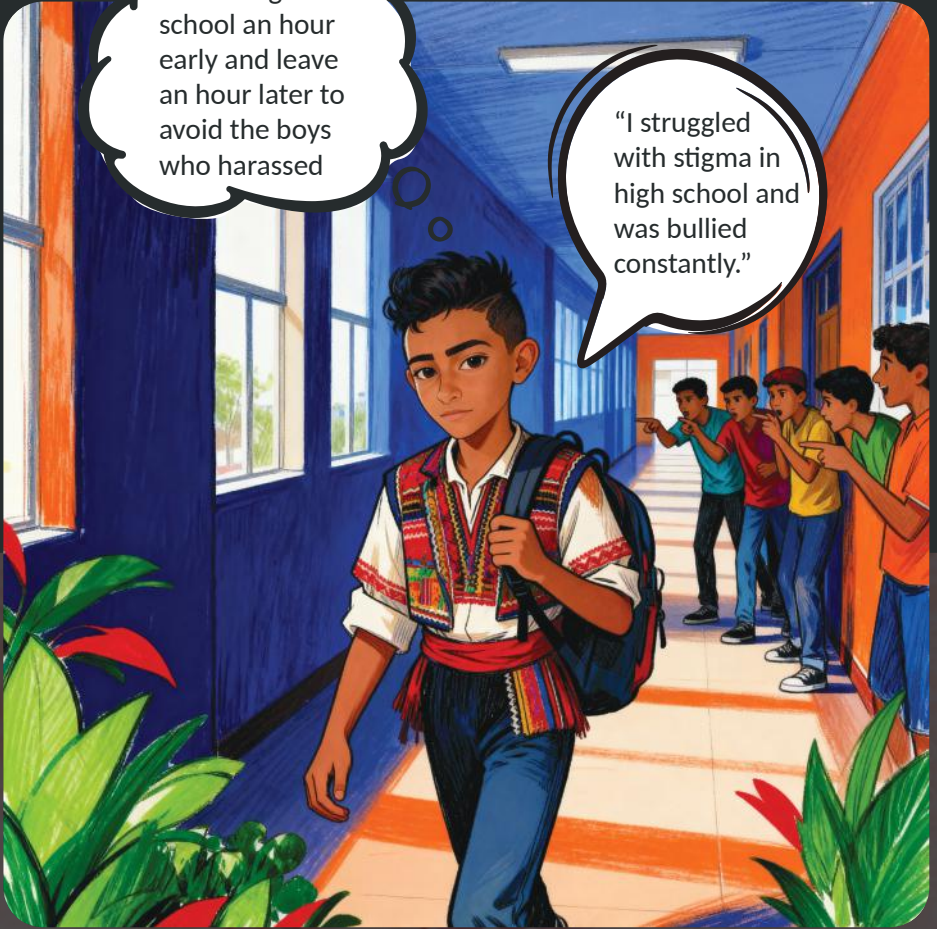
"I've been fascinated with makeup and fashion since I was a child"



School was never safe for Jules. He learned to survive by shrinking himself; arriving early, leaving late, avoiding hallways filled with hostility.

"I had to go to school an hour early and leave an hour later to avoid the boys who harassed

"I struggled with stigma in high school and was bullied constantly."



As a teenager, Jules looked for refuge anywhere he could find it. For a moment, he imagined that the priesthood might offer shelter from harassment and judgement.

“That did not work for me, because of course, I am a gay man.”

“As a teenager I wanted to become a priest because I felt that I would be isolated from the harassment.”

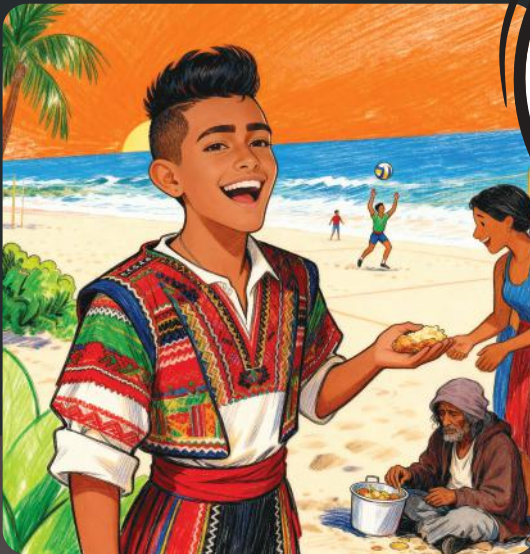


Before his diagnosis, Jules lived life with full colour, family gatherings, beach days, designing clothes, giving food to neighbours in need. He carried joy like a bright thread woven through everything he did.

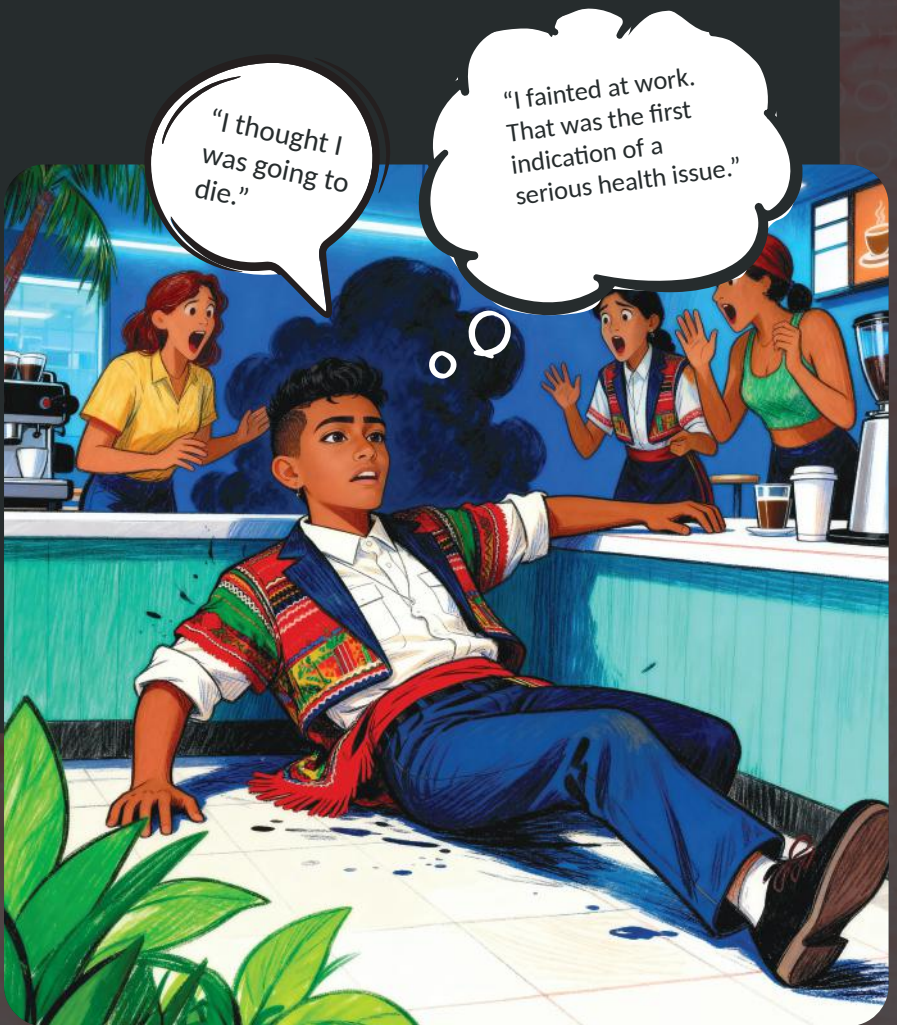
“My life was an adventure. Days filled with joy, family reunions and socializing.”



“I felt that I was blessed.”



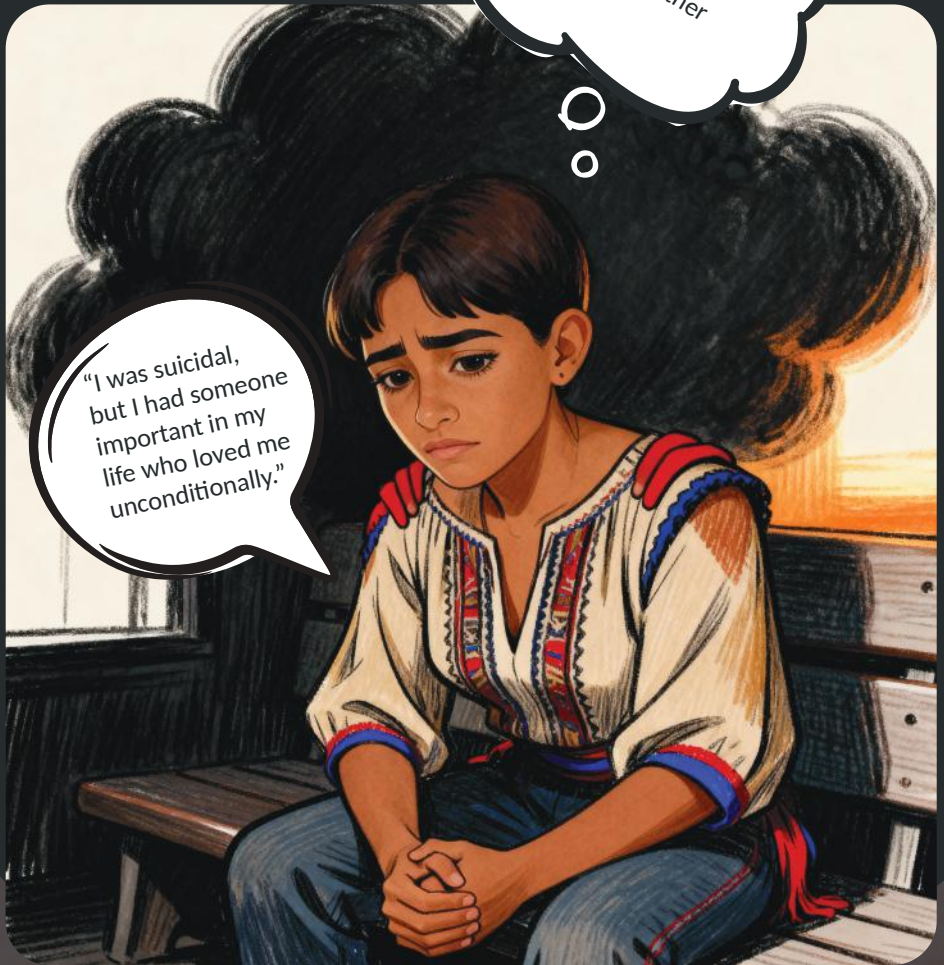
The first sign that something was wrong came suddenly, unexpected, frightening, and life-changing.



Guilt weighed heavily on Jules. Fear blurred into despair, and he wondered whether he had unknowingly harmed someone he cared about.

"I felt guilty because I thought I might have passed the virus on to other people."

"I was suicidal, but I had someone important in my life who loved me unconditionally."

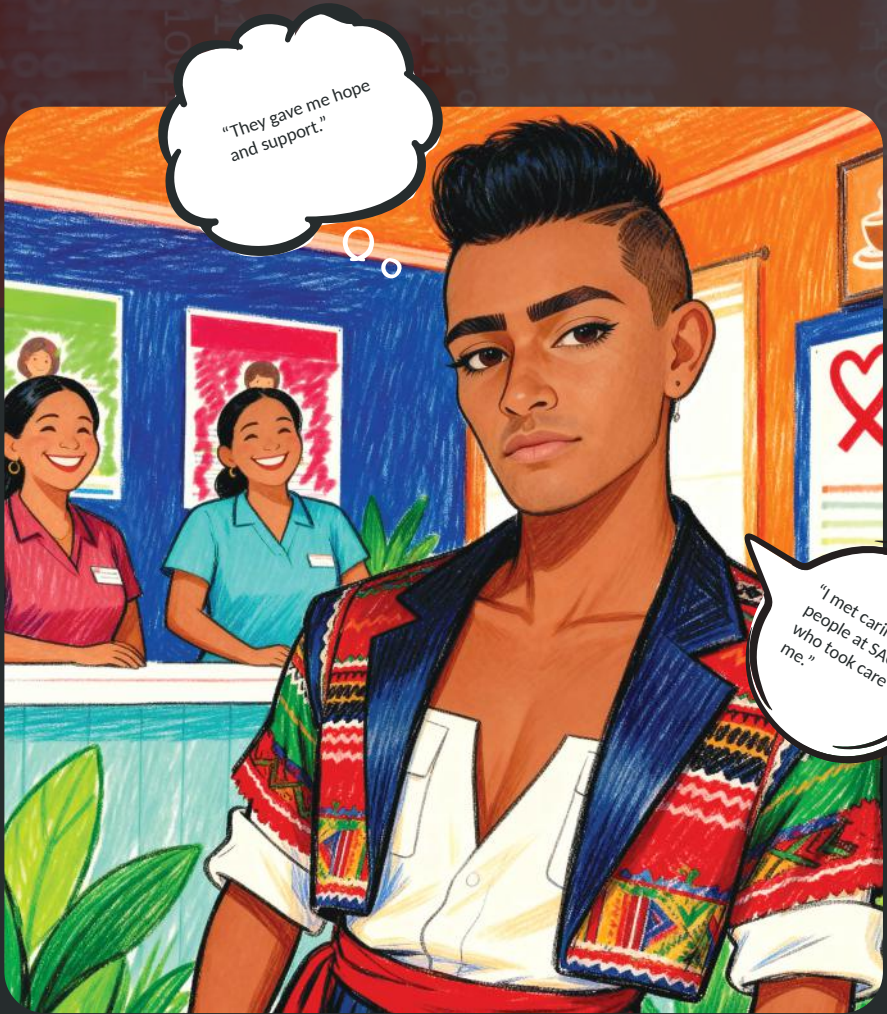




"My husband never judged me. He was there for me at a critical time and never judged me."

"I met my future husband in 1984. We had been together for 17 years at the time of my diagnosis."

At the darkest moment, love became Jules' anchor. Long before the diagnosis, he had met someone who would stand by him through every storm.



When his world felt unsteady, Jules found a place where compassion lived, a community that treated him with dignity and care.

Stigma found Jules even in places meant to heal.
One appointment revealed the deep wounds caused by
misunderstanding and fear.

"I felt belittled and
small."

"They wore double
gloves as well,
but
didn't do that for
other people."

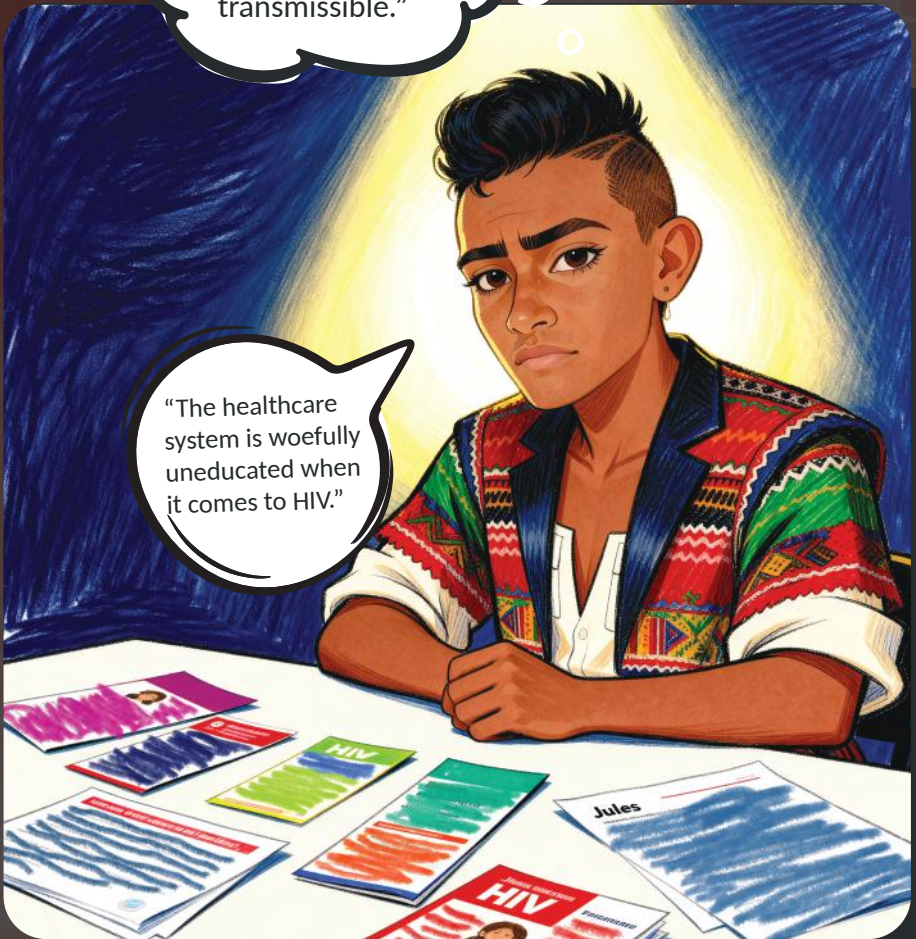
"I noticed that they
disinfected the
room I was in more
than once."



Jules had always believed that being undetectable meant safety. But the world around him was still learning.

“I always thought that being undetectable meant that I was not transmissible.”

“The healthcare system is woefully uneducated when it comes to HIV.”

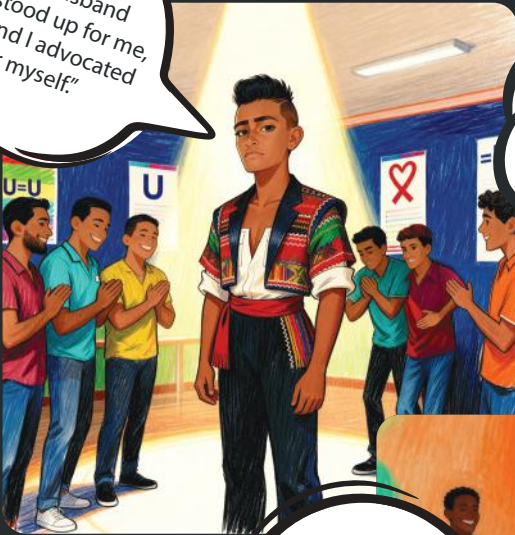


Jules chose to transform pain into purpose. Through education and connection, he built what he had once needed: community.



The journey reshaped Jules, revealing strength he never knew he had. Advocacy became not only his mission, but his truth.

"My husband stood up for me, and I advocated for myself."



"Being HIV positive has made me a better person."

"Being part of the HIV community helped me get closer to becoming the person I am now."



SARAH'S STORY

Finding Hope

Sarah arrived in Canada from Zambia in October 2018, hoping for a fresh start. But during her immigration medical exam, everything changed. The doctor announced her diagnosis from the doorway, with no privacy and no compassion. Fear, confusion, and disbelief hit her all at once.

"The news felt like the
all world was
crushing on me."



The days that followed were heavy with fear and uncertainty. Sarah worried about her immigration status and the stigma she might face. When she was hospitalized for a back injury, she spent six days without a bath or shower. The experience left her feeling neglected and emotionally exhausted.



Despite the fear, Sarah found moments of care. The woman who welcomed her into her home comforted her, reminding her she was not alone. Later, a peer support worker shared her own story, helping Sarah feel understood for the first time since her diagnosis.

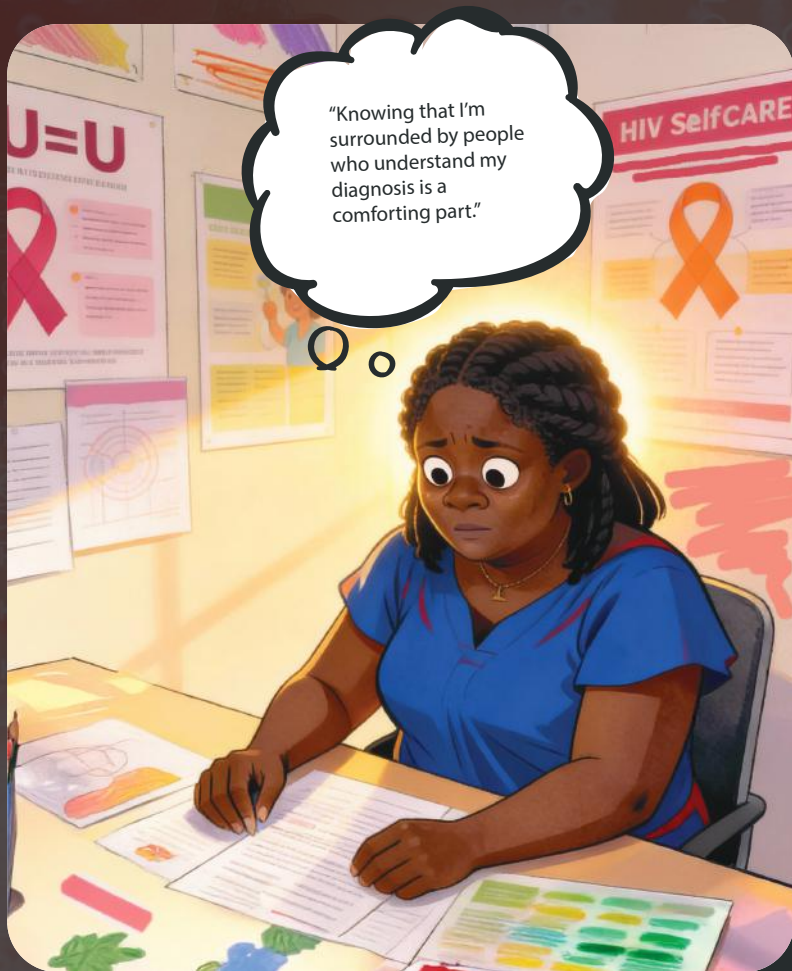


"What if I told you I have been living with HIV for 30 years?"

"Don't worry. You're in Canada. You'll be just fine."

"I felt a relief knowing someone understood what I was going through."

Understanding her diagnosis became a turning point. Learning about HIV and U=U helped Sarah regain control. Volunteering and later working as a peer navigator allowed her to help others walk the road she had once feared.



"Getting the information and awareness was the turning point."



Today, Sarah wants people to understand her journey. Her diagnosis does not reflect carelessness, it reflects a moment she had no control over. She hopes for compassion, informed healthcare, and a world free from stigma. Her story is one of resilience, strength, and a desire to help others through knowledge and truth.



"A desire to overcome stigma and educate people about the science behind U=U."

"I wish people understood what I was going through... that I wasn't careless with my life."

"Strength & resilience."



HAUWA'S STORY


"Not a Loose Life"

Hauwa has been living with HIV for more than two decades. In her community in Northern Nigeria, stigma sticks quickly, and stories about people like her rarely match the truth.

"In this region, people living with HIV face stigma and discrimination and are seen as contaminated people who got infected because they lived a loose life."

"I have been living with HIV for about 22 years. I am from Northern Nigeria, a region that has Islam as the majority of its population."





"And have always been afraid because of past trauma."

"I lived a life of depression, sadness and anxiety because of stigma and discrimination because of my HIV status."

Before she could tell her story in her own words, Hauwa lived mostly inside her worries. Stigma and discrimination followed her everywhere, shaping how she saw herself.

Her diagnosis arrived after her body started speaking in pain. A biopsy on painful lymph nodes brought the words she feared most.


"A gloomy moment, I started counting my last days on earth, I felt I was going to die soon."



"After a biopsy was carried out on painful lymph nodes that were removed from my neck which showed that I was HIV positive."

Shock, fear of death,
a sense that time is suddenly limited.



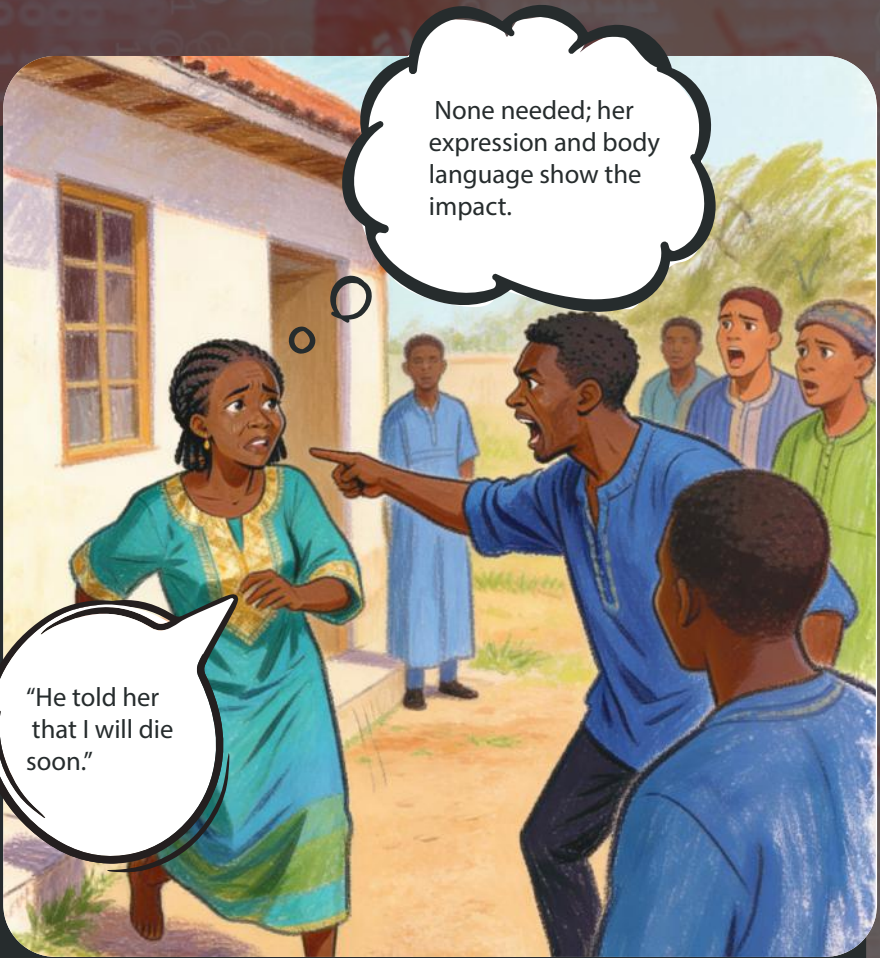


"In almost all the cases my mother comes to the scene to defend, protect and advocate for me."

"My mother."

In the middle of fear and uncertainty, one person never left: her mother. When others turned away, her mother stayed close.

Stigma did not only come from strangers. It came from within the family, in words that cut deeper than any diagnosis.



None needed; her expression and body language show the impact.

“He told her that I will die soon.”

“When my mother told my uncle about my HIV status...”


Hauwa believed people had the right to know her status, especially if they wanted to build a life together. But honesty often turned into a weapon used against her.



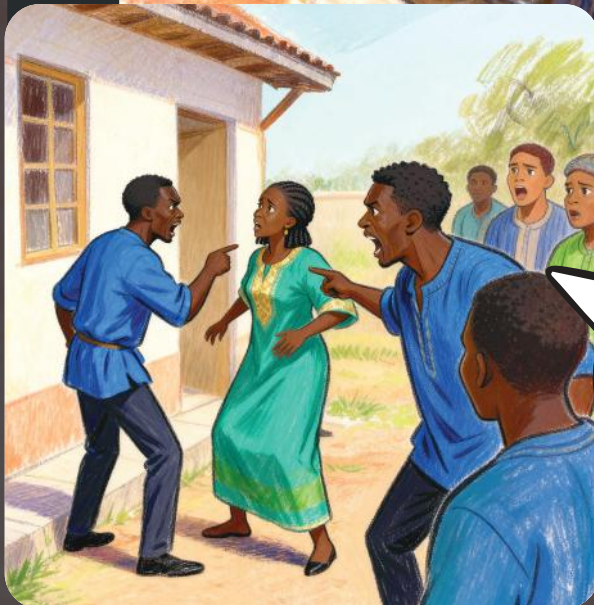
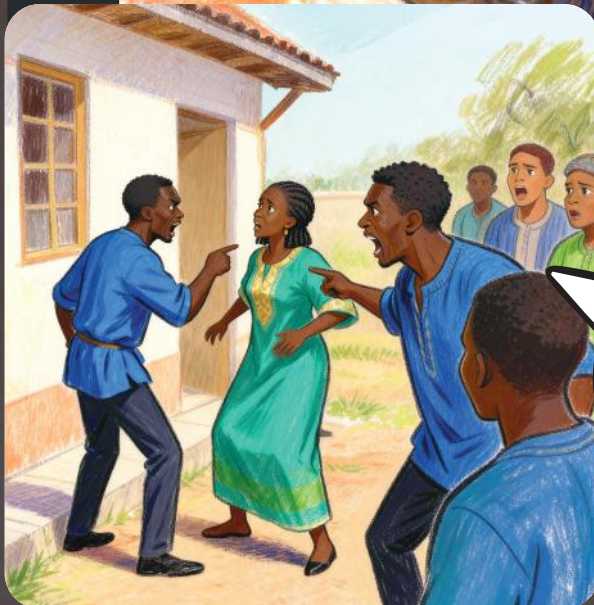
"Have experienced related stigma several times."

"Told several suitors seeking to marry me about my HIV status, and they ended up spreading my status in our community."

Not all rejection was quiet. Some moments were loud, physical, and unforgettable.

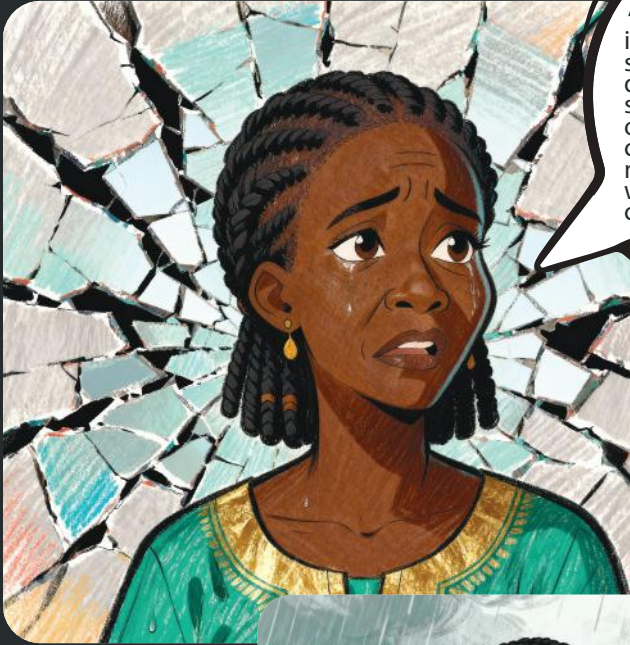
An illustration of a woman with braided hair, wearing a green dress with gold trim, running away from a gutter. She has a distressed expression. The gutter is a simple concrete structure with a black plastic liner. The background shows a plain wall and a window.

"A suitor literally pushed me and I almost fell into an open gutter when I told him that I am HIV positive. I felt he should know because he intended to marry me."

An illustration showing a woman in a green dress being confronted by a group of men in blue shirts. One man is pointing at her, and another is shouting. They are standing in front of a simple building with a window. The scene is outdoors with some greenery in the background.

"I once had an argument with my brother and he insulted me in the public that I should keep quiet with my HIV mouth, it really hurt me."

Even trust was not always safe. A friend she relied on turned her private truth into public information.



"A friend I confided in about my HIV status went to disclose my HIV status to an organization who contacted me for more information without my consent."

"To just end it all and leave the earth because the shame and pain was too much to bear."



With so much stigma and betrayal, Hauwa felt as if there was only one way to escape the shame. Yet every time she came close to giving up, her mother stepped in.




"To end my life and let everything come to an end."

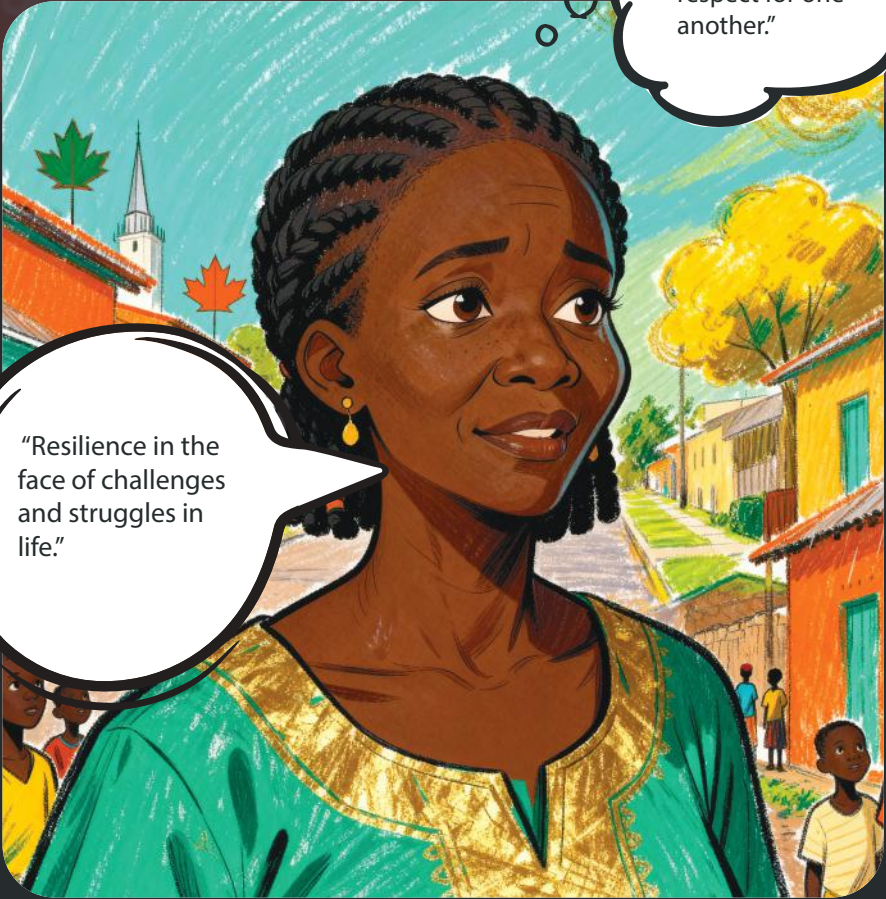
"Yes, in almost all the cases my mother always comes to the scene to defend, protect and advocate for me."



Hauwa knows that care is more than medicine. It is also how people are treated, spoken to, and seen.

An illustration of a meeting between healthcare workers and a patient. A woman in a green and gold patterned top is speaking to a group of healthcare workers in white coats and blue scrubs. They are sitting around a white table with notebooks and pens. A large speech bubble is positioned above the group, containing text.

"To show more care, concern, and well being of patient asides providing medication and blood works. And also, avoid stigmatizing and discriminating against people living with HIV."



"Equality and respect for one another."

"Resilience in the face of challenges and struggles in life."

Looking back, Hauwa sees not just pain, but resilience. She imagines a world where people living with HIV are met with equality instead of suspicion.

With time, Hauwa began to speak back to the stories told about her. Her life, marked by struggle and resilience, deserved to be seen with truth and dignity.

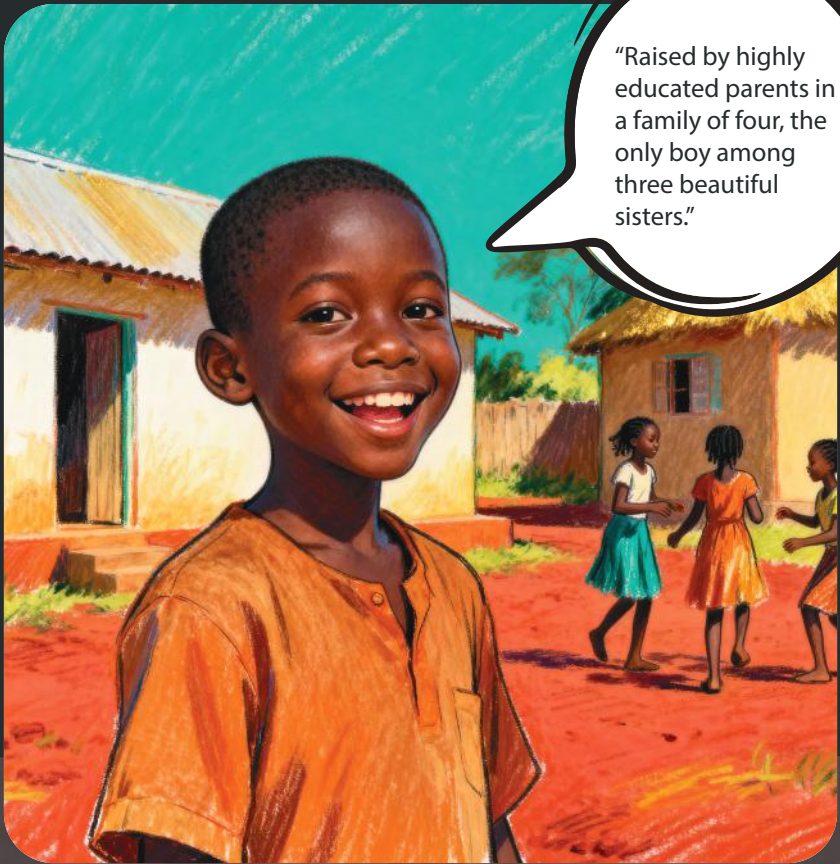
“That I did not live a loose street life.”



MICHAEL'S STORY

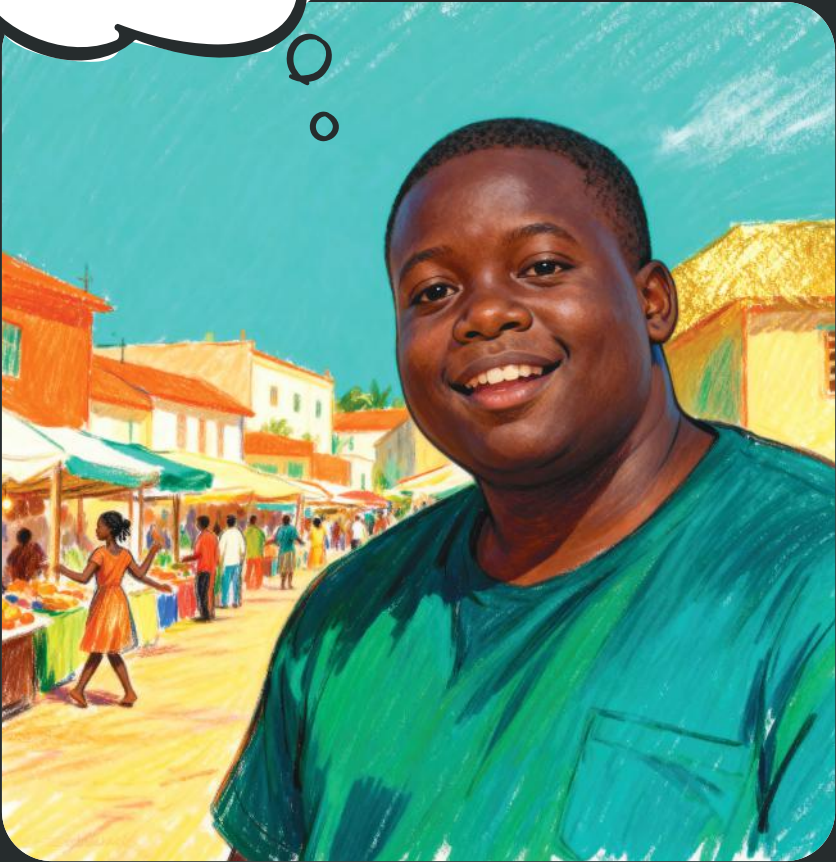
An Unexpected Path Forward

Michael was born in Iganga, a small town in eastern Uganda, where education and family honour shaped every step.



"Raised by highly educated parents in a family of four, the only boy among three beautiful sisters."

"My life was smooth, full of adventure... wanting to find ways to upgrade in life and future."



For him, life was an adventure. A future waiting to be shaped.



Michael left everything behind to build a safer life in Canada.

"I froze... my soul seemed to have travelled trying to trace my footsteps."

"I thought the doctor was playing a joke... asked for another set of tests."

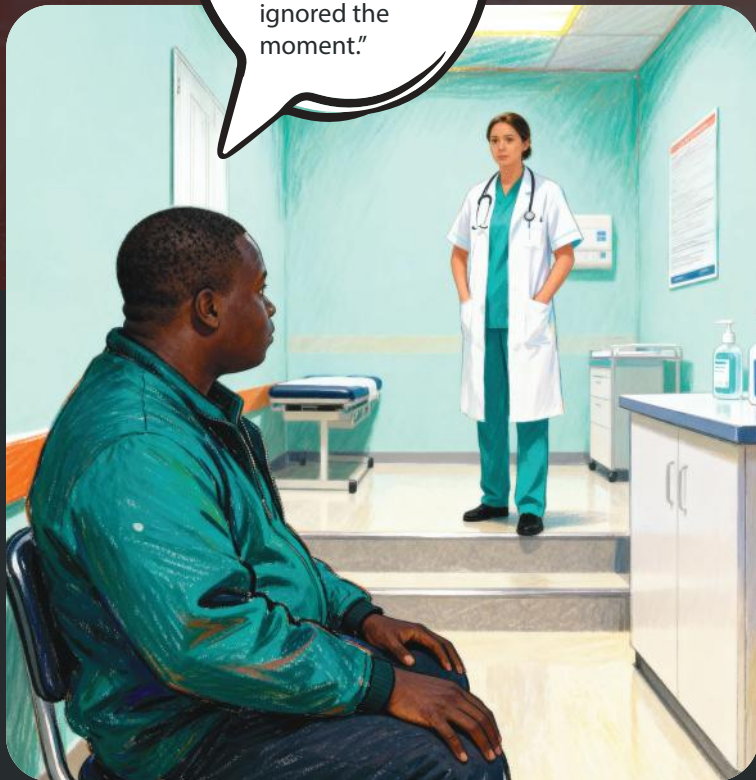


Far from home, Michael struggled alone with the heaviest news of his life.

“At the moment
I had no one
besides me.”



“A doctor felt distant working on me... but I ignored the moment.”



Misconceptions can build invisible walls.



"I was still processing the news... I wanted time alone to figure out my next steps."



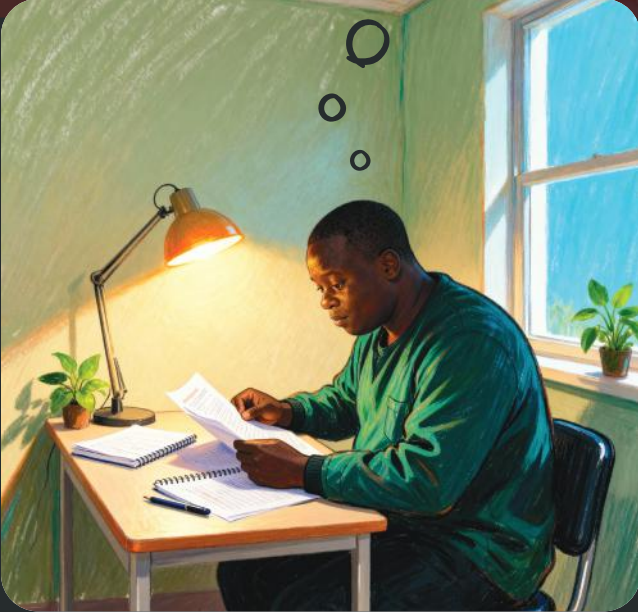
He needed time. Time to breathe. Time to think.

Hope came from the community.

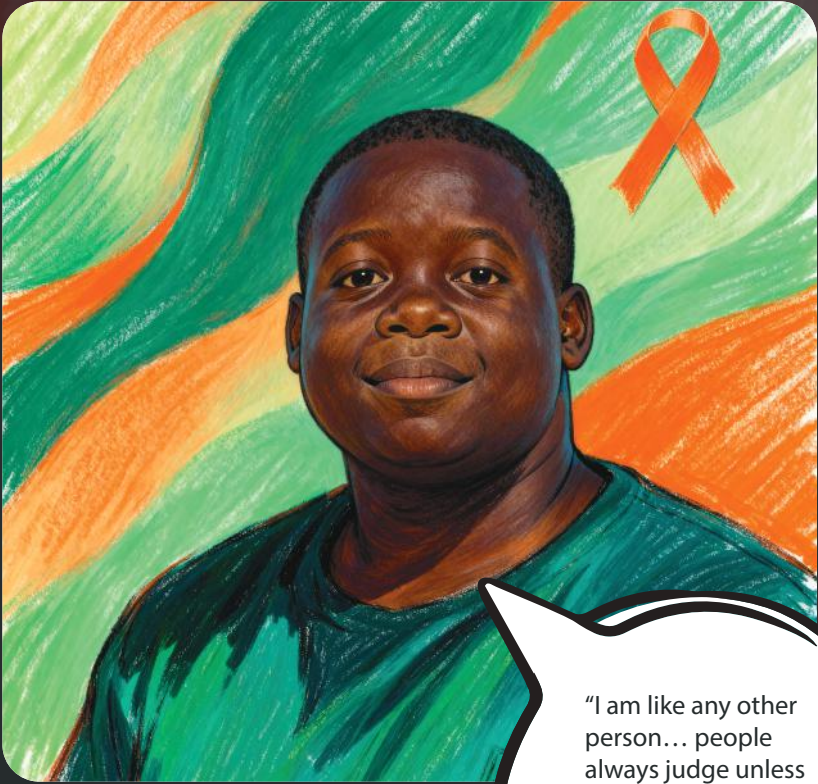
"A loving welcoming people with a blessed case worker beside me."



“How do I make my future better as a person... most important of all health wise?”



With support, a new version of his life began to take shape.



"I am like any other person... people always judge unless they go through the same life event."

Michael wants the world to understand one truth.

“People with HIV are human as well.”



Compassion can save lives.

"Pay it Forward."



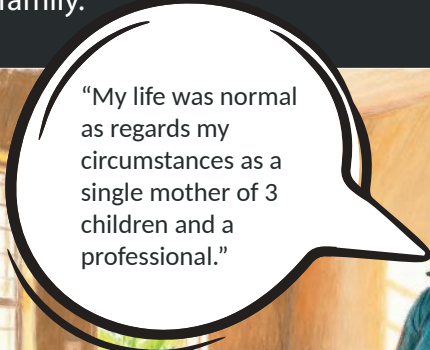
Michael walks toward a future he is still writing.

NGOZI'S STORY

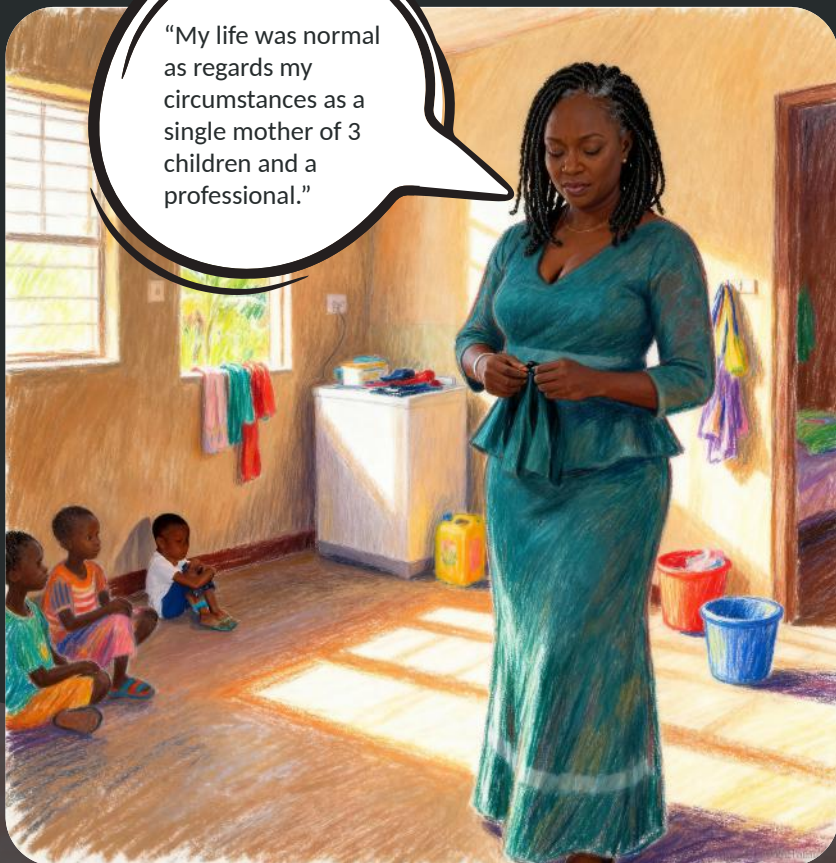
A Life of Responsibility and Dreams

Before everything changed, Ngozi's life was full. She was a single mother of three, a professional, and a woman determined to rise.

Her days were shaped by responsibility, ambition, and love for her family.



"My life was normal as regards my circumstances as a single mother of 3 children and a professional."



Stigma to Resilience

An HIV Anti-Stigma Graphic Novel by SafeLink Alberta

Ngozi arrived in Canada carrying hope.
The immigration medical exam felt routine.
She had no reason to expect her life would
change that day.

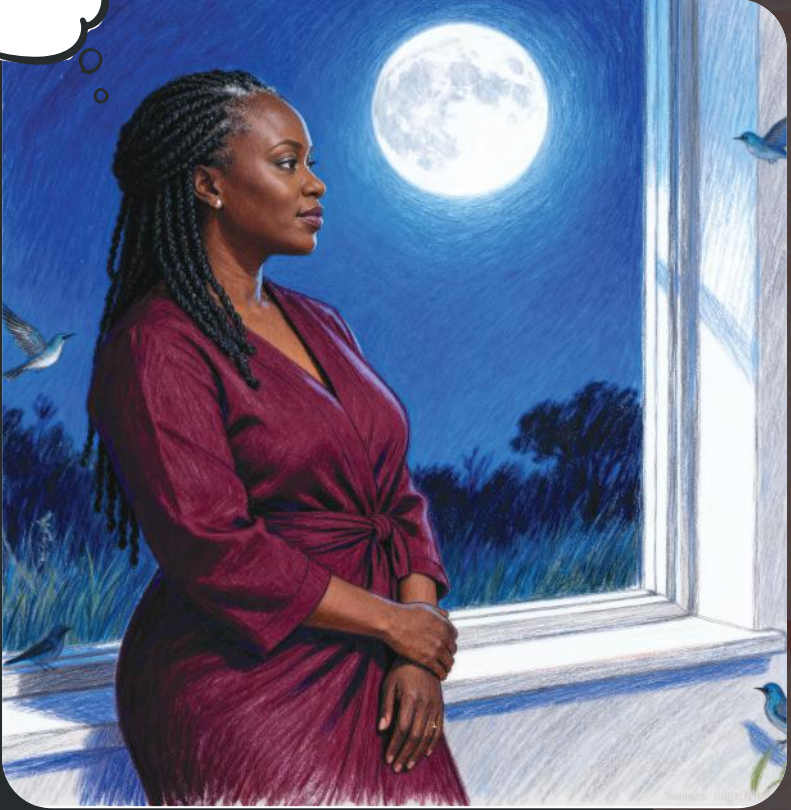


The diagnosis came without warning.
Shock replaced language.
Ngozi would later say she could not remember how she left
the doctor's office.



It did not fully sink in until the next day.
In a new country, far from familiarity, the weight arrived.

“Hmmm”



Ngozi allowed herself empathy. She did not collapse.
She searched for answers.

“It wasn’t easy but I
gave myself some
understanding and
empathy.”



She told no one. There was no one to lean on yet.
Information became her support.



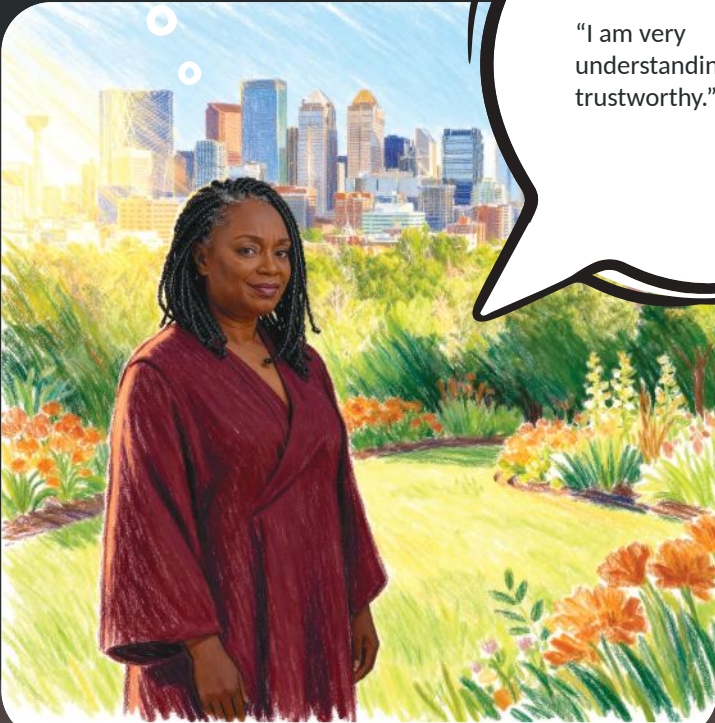
“I just kept to myself
and supported myself
with information.”



Looking back, Ngozi knows who she is.
And she knows what care should look like.

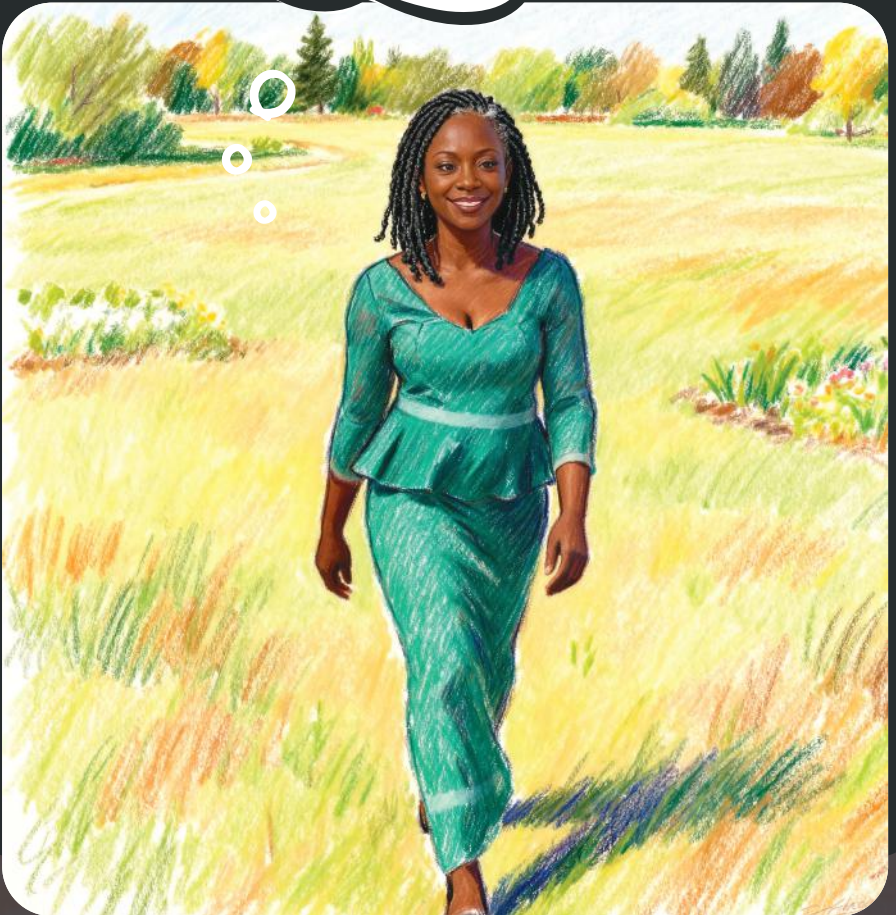
“They should learn
continuously and
treat with empathy.”

“I am very
understanding and
trustworthy.”



Ngozi does not imagine a perfect world.
She imagines something more honest.

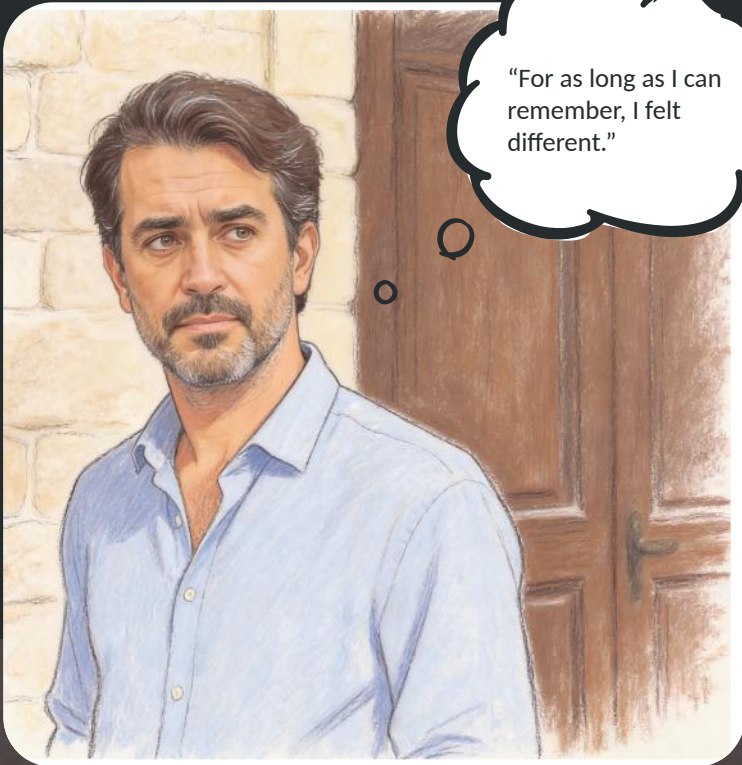
“Paradise in
imperfection.”



SAMIR'S STORY

“Not a verdict”

Samir grew up in the Middle East, a shy boy who never felt like he truly belonged. School and university passed by without leaving a mark. What stayed with him was a quiet knowing that he was different-and that this difference had to be hidden.



Samir knew he was gay, but he kept it hidden.

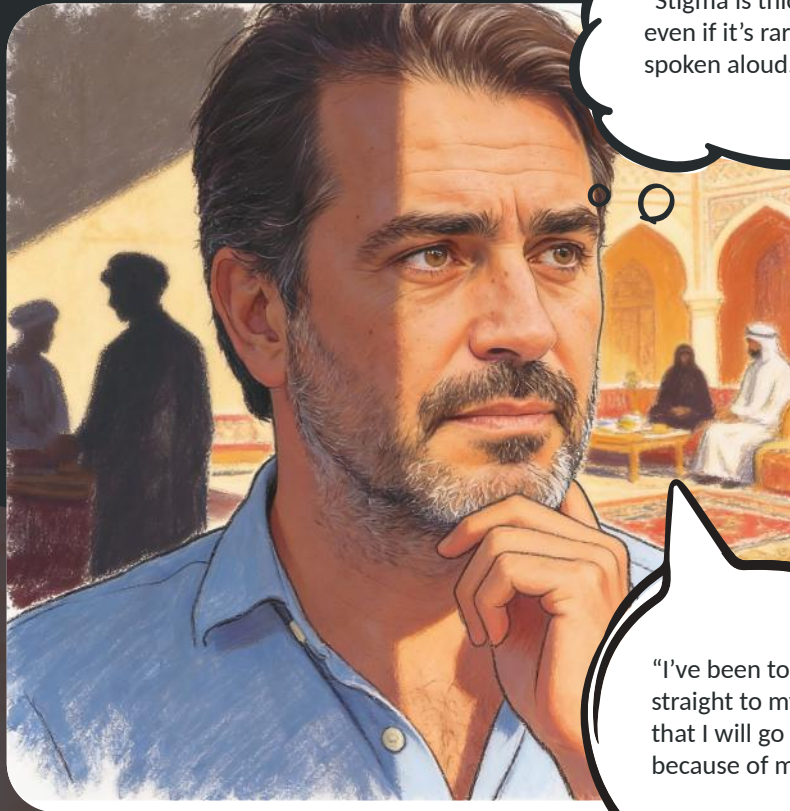
In a place where silence was safer than truth, he learned to read people carefully. Only two people truly saw him.

“Beyond them, I stayed in the closet.”



“My mom and my sister were my heroes.”

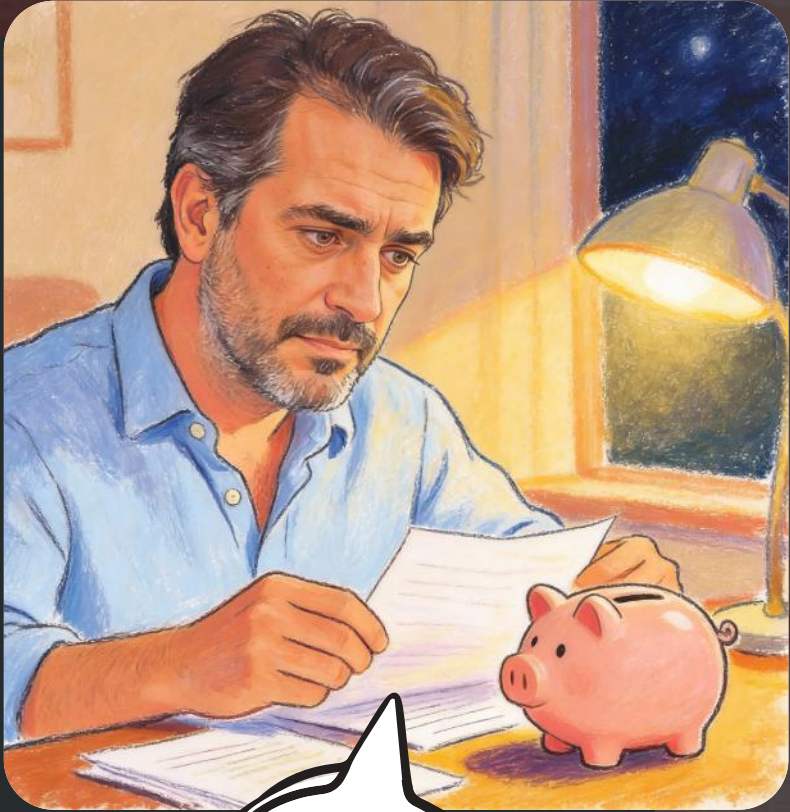
Samir grew up in a culture of contrasts. Generosity and warmth lived alongside judgment and fear. Faith, identity, and illness were things people whispered about, or never spoke of at all.



“Stigma is thick, even if it’s rarely spoken aloud.”

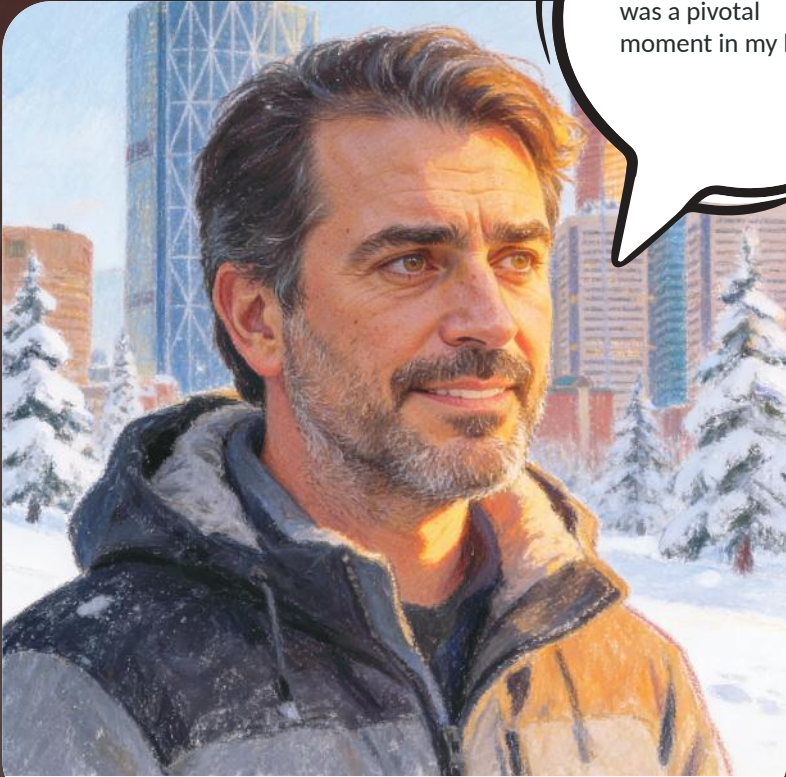
“I’ve been told straight to my face that I will go to hell because of my faith.”

Even as a young man, Samir was careful and patient. He saved bit by bit, holding onto a quiet dream of a different life. There were setbacks. Doubt. Waiting. But the dream stayed alive.



"I saved bit by bit, holding on to a quiet dream of a different life."

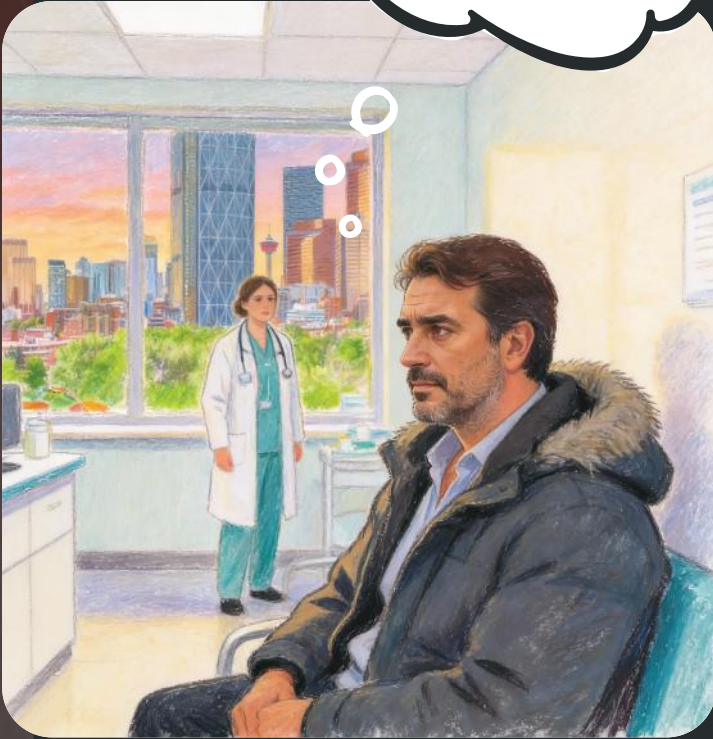
Landing in Calgary was a turning point. Cold air, new streets, and the weight of possibility. For the first time, Samir felt that another version of life might be possible.



“Landing in Calgary was a pivotal moment in my life.”

Stigma followed Samir across borders. It lived in silence, in assumptions, and sometimes in healthcare spaces. Too often, he felt the weight of discomfort from those meant to care.

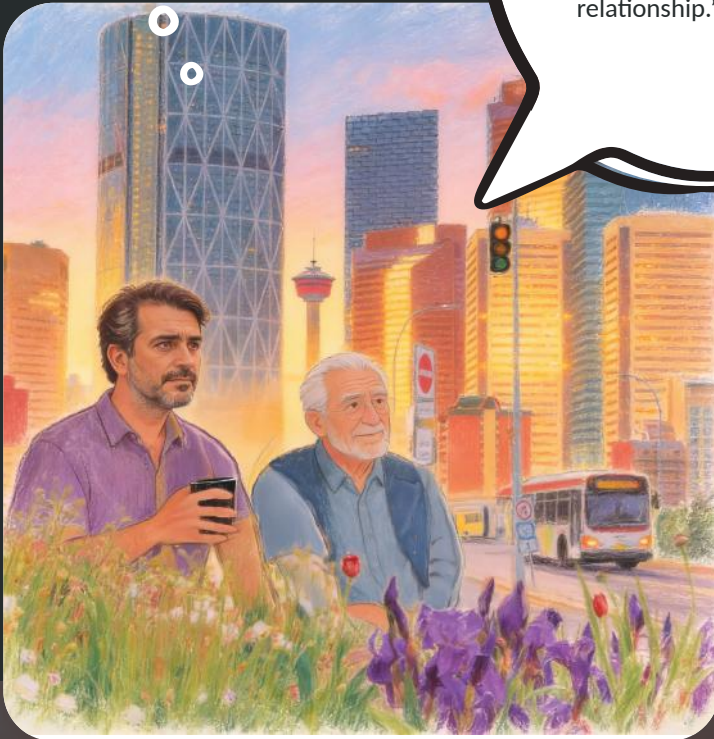
“Too often, I’ve felt the weight of assumptions or discomfort.”



Over time, Samir built a chosen family. A loving relationship. A few people who gave him what he once only imagined: freedom to live fully as himself.

“They’ve given me the freedom to live as my full self.”

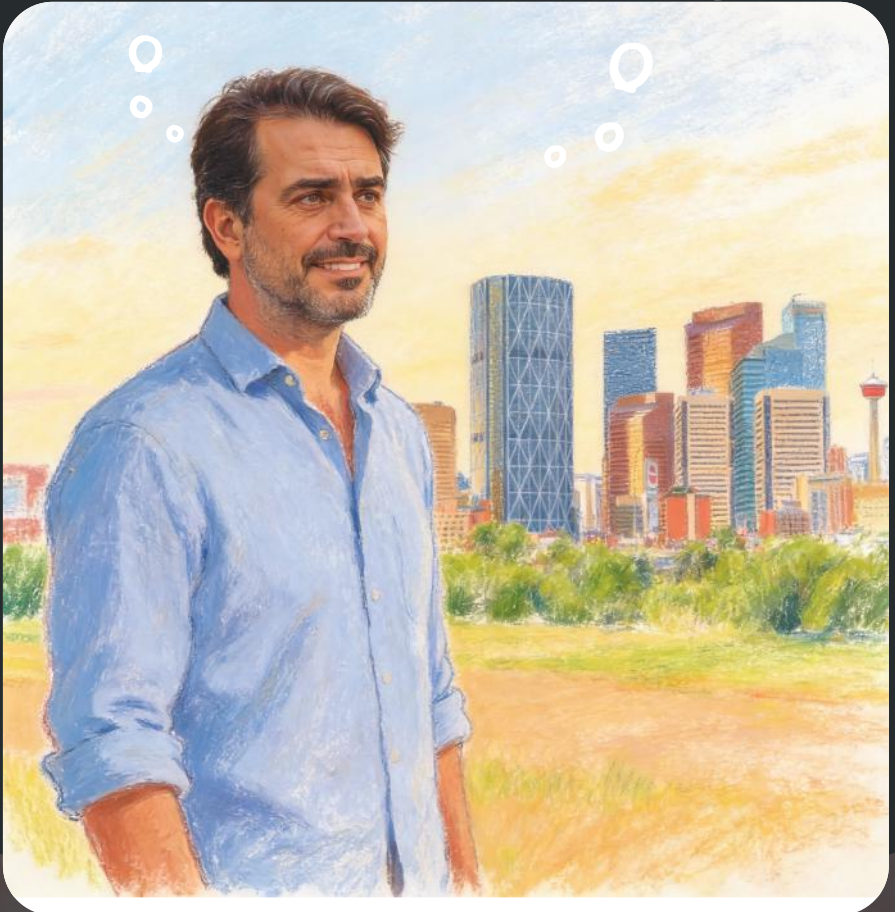
“Today, I’m in a loving relationship.”



Samir imagines a world where HIV is not a verdict.
Where diagnosis does not define worth.
Where he never has to hide again.

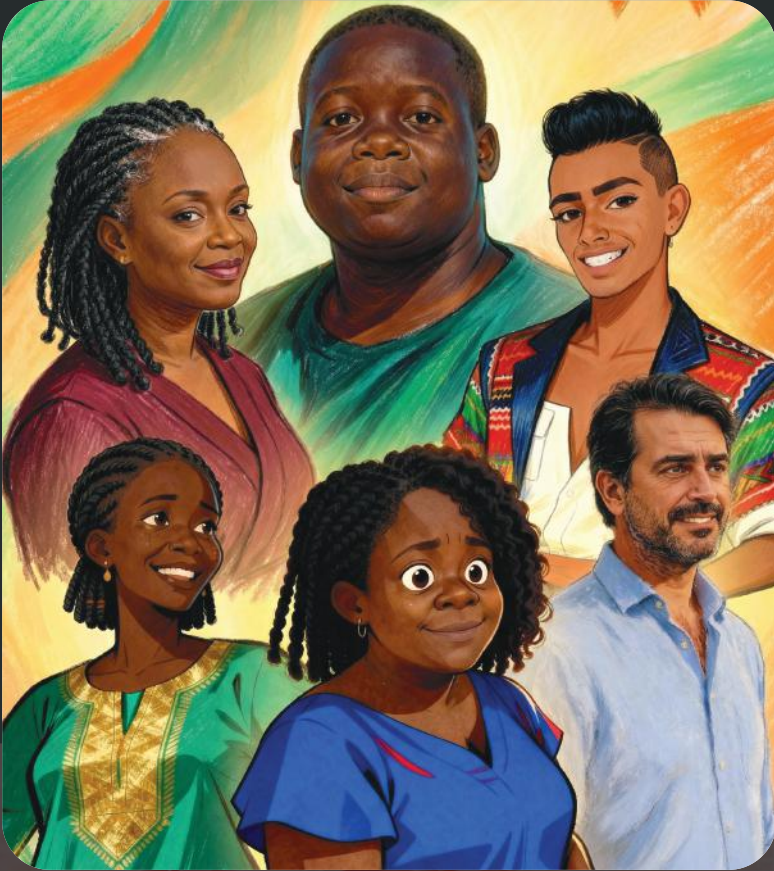
"HIV is a virus,
not a verdict."

"I could just be me;
fully, freely, and
without fear."



conclusion

All Six characters gather in a shared space, reflecting on their journeys. Together they voice a unified message:
"Stigma cannot define us. We live full and free."



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**Treating People
with Humanity.**

Six journeys. Six voices. One shared truth: HIV is not the end, but the beginning of resilience. From the streets of Lima to the villages of Nigeria, from the quiet apartments of Canada to the vibrant halls of advocacy, Stigma to Resilience brings together stories of stigma, survival, and strength. This graphic novel is a testament to love, dignity, and the unbreakable will to live free.

U=U



Access the digital version scanning the QR Code

