

## Treatment, Support, and Positive Attitude Help South African Women Overcome HIV Infection



Thanks to ART and the related care she receives at a PEPFAR-supported clinic in Brits, South Africa, Ruth Modingwane is living proof that treatment does help. Ruth says, "People who come to Motswedi waTshepo Clinic see me and realize that it is possible to have HIV and still live a normal, productive life."

When Ruth Modingwane tested positive for HIV in July 2003 she was frightened about what the future would bring. As a single mother living in Brits, South Africa, she was concerned not only about herself, but also about her 10 year-old son.

Instead of giving into her fears, 25-year-old Ruth accepted her condition and began to speak openly about it. She told her family and friends that she was HIV-positive and even talked about it on a local radio station where she worked.

"I knew keeping my diagnosis bottled up would kill me," Ruth says, attributing her decision to disclose her status to the community support group she attended and to her family's love and encouragement.

Although her decision to live life in the open has been a source of strength to many in the community, Ruth faced her share of hardship and discrimination. Recalling what happened when staff at the radio station first learned she had HIV, Ruth

describes how everyone avoided her and there was a constant buzz of depressing conversations about people who were dying of AIDS.

"The negative reactions really hurt me, but as time passed I came to accept that HIV is no different than diabetes or hypertension," Ruth admits.

In November 2005, Ruth began ARV therapy through a program supported by a Twinning Center partnership linking Brits District Hospital with the Pretoria-based Foundation for Professional Development.

"Before I started ART, I was very weak and felt sick every day. My CD4 count was only 34 and I had just about every symptom you can think of. The treatment has changed that, though. After just eight months, my CD4 was up to 284 and I hadn't experienced any side effects from the medication. ART has kept me going," Ruth says happily, noting that her body and skin tone are back to normal.

"I have the support of my son and my boyfriend. I also work at Motswedi waTshepo Clinic as a data capture clerk," Ruth continues. "People are always shocked that I work, but there is nothing wrong with HIV-positive people, as long as they get the treatment and support they need."

Motswedi waTshepo Clinic, an ART referral site of Brits, is one place they can get that care and support, according to Ruth. For her, it is more than just a place to work—it is a place where she can give something back to her community. “When people come here they see me, an HIV-positive woman who used to be so sick, and they believe there are possibilities for them too,” she says. “They become more optimistic and motivated ... they start to have hope for a better life.”