



Alisa Smith
Champions of Resistance

Nkosi Johnson

Nkosi Johnson was born HIV-positive in 1989, having contracted the illness from his mother, Nonthlanthla Nkosi. She died of AIDS in April of 1997. Nkosi was initially given nine months to live. He surpassed this prediction and at the age of three, he was taken in by Gail Johnson.

Nkosi is a South African child, who is dying from AIDS. He became a national figure after a school refused to admit him because he suffers from AIDS. He fought his exclusion, eloquently bringing his case and a demand for children's rights to South Africa's Parliament and a meeting with Nelson Mandela. He addressed the fact that "You can't get Aids by hugging, kissing, holding hands. We are normal human beings, we can walk, we can talk," he said in a haunting voice. As a result, Parliament passed an anti-discrimination statute.

Nkosi is a forceful, intelligent, and informed speaker and he talks about the plight of children living with AIDS and how people in his community are afraid of individuals who openly discuss their AIDS status. Nkosi's big moment came when he addressed delegates at the international AIDS conference in Durban. A tiny figure in a shiny dark suit and sneakers, Nkosi Johnson, held the attention of an audience of 10,000 delegates who responded with tearful silence as he told the story of his birth and his life. "Please help people with AIDS," he said. "Support them, love them, care for them." Later that year he took the same message to an AIDS conference in Atlanta, Georgia. "It is sad to see so many sick people," he said. "I wish everybody in the world could be well."

Nkosi is probably the longest surviving child AIDS victim in South Africa. The story of Nkosi Johnson has galvanized AIDS-awareness campaigners.