

‘POSITIVE’ ROLE MODEL MUSA NJOKO TO CARRY OLYMPIC TORCH

Johannesburg, 10 June 2004 -- HIV-positive 31 year-old South African Musa Njoko has been nominated by UNAIDS to participate in this year’s Olympic Torch Relay, to be held in Cape Town on Saturday 12 June 2004.

The initiative is part of an ongoing UNAIDS and International Olympic Committee (IOC) programme to tackle HIV-related stigma and discrimination and raise awareness about HIV and AIDS.

The Olympic Torch Relay gets individuals who have demonstrated the best in humanity to carry the Olympic flame on a high-profile global journey from Sydney to Athens.

Nine years ago, Musa was one of the first South African women to publicly disclose her HIV status at a time when the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS could have resulted in physical harm and even death. Undeterred by this reality, she has given a voice to women and girls, shattering the silence around issues such as rape, abuse and HIV/AIDS.

In 1998, Musa was part of the first recruitment of the UNDP/UNAIDS Greater Involvement of People living with HIV/AIDS Project led by the United Nations Theme Group in South Africa. As part of this programme, Musa worked with the South African electricity utility company, Eskom, providing guidance in the development of their workplace-based policy and programme and counseling and support to colleagues infected and affected by the epidemic.

“As a woman living with HIV, Musa has inspired many HIV-positive people in South Africa and has helped break down the walls of stigma and discrimination, which continue to be major obstacles in winning the fight against AIDS,” said Dr Peter Piot, UNAIDS Executive Director. “By inviting Musa to participate in the Olympic Torch Relay, the IOC has shown true solidarity with people living with HIV.”

Musa’s contribution to the national and international struggle against AIDS has been acknowledged by South African President Thabo Mbeki, His Majesty King Goodwill Zwelithini and Deputy President Jacob Zuma. Deputy President Zuma has called Musa “a perfect example of what we should be doing in partnership against the AIDS pandemic”. Her contribution to the national HIV/AIDS fight was further recognized when she was short listed as a finalist in the 2002 Checkers Women of the Year Awards.

Musa, although just one amongst countless others, is a perfect example of how one individual has used her HIV status to bring about unity and build bridges between those living and affected by HIV/AIDS and the greater community.

Reflecting on the carrying of the Olympic Torch, Musa said, "In Africa the majority of people living with HIV and AIDS are women. I am one of those women. Carrying the Olympic Torch is saying to all those young women living with HIV, stand up for your rights, believe in yourself, you are still the future of tomorrow. Its saying to the leaders of Africa - be a flame for change, ensure that all your policies and programmes address the needs of women and girls. Ensure that those living with and affected by AIDS can reach their dreams through completing their education, by having access to treatment. Its saying to the men of Africa, be a flame for change-protect your health, know your status and protect the health of your partners. Its saying to the sports community - do more, get involved in AIDS prevention and its saying to those sports stars living with HIV break the silence, speak out and lead by example."

Musa is currently working on the M-Net production reality television programme Project Fame as one of the teachers to the housemates participating in the programme. She co-presented the television programme POSITIVE – a production by the South African Broadcasting Corporation that documented how people live with HIV/AIDS. She has presented five-minute inserts on issues of HIV/AIDS, sex and sexuality on the youth TV programme Take 5.

The Torch Relay will be followed by a two day workshop in Johannesburg on 17 and 18 June involving the IOC, UNAIDS, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) and the World Bank exploring issues around HIV/AIDS and sports.

“The world of sport is not separate from the rest of world“, said IOC President Jacques Rogge. Sports breaks down barriers, promotes self esteem and can teach life skills and healthy behaviour. Athletes can be an inspiration and role models for the youth of the world.”

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