

Gracia's story

by Gracia Violeta Ross Quiroga, a Bolivian advocate for people living with HIV. Excerpts from her address at the Ecumenical Pre-Conference prior to the International AIDS Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, July 2005.

In Spanish my name means “grace.” My parents named me Gracia due to their understanding of “God’s Grace” — that wonderful attribute of God, which enables human beings to be saved. My father is an evangelical Pastor. He founded principal churches in Bolivia. I have been learning the Bible and attending Sunday school since I was a child. However when I was 18, I became rebellious and decided to live my life according to my will. I was involved in sexual activity without accurate information about the risk of AIDS.

In 2000, I discovered I was HIV positive. The hardest challenge I ever faced was telling my family about my status. I felt I was going to ruin my father’s leadership and that my family would reject me. I was touched when my father told me, “We do not want to know how this happened, we have no questions, we only know you are our child and we are going to be with you every single day.”

The second important challenge I faced being HIV positive was telling my church. I planned not to tell them at all even though I became a public speaker and an advocate for people living with AIDS in Bolivia and Latin America. Because of an earlier event with another person in the church, I thought the church would expel me. Then the moment came. I had become so famous that I could no longer hide the story. My family and I decided to pray; we prayed for a long time, we had many questions as a family, many objections, and doubts. I remember we had family meetings and discussions.

My mother said, “You cannot sacrifice her for the sake of the leadership of your father.” My father said: “If the members of the church do not understand this AIDS issue it is because they do not have compassion, then they are not real believers; they are only religious people. In case they reject you, it will be evident that they are not Christian.” It was really a difficult situation. We had to trust that God was going to touch their hearts, even though most of them did not have basic knowledge or information about HIV/AIDS risk.

We failed on this. We did not trust God as we had to. We became anxious people during this time. I told them the truth. The response was overwhelming; they reacted with love and support. They cried with my family and me for two hours. It was so amazing to see a routine-based church transformed into a source of love.

Unfortunately, my church would never have considered the AIDS issue if I had been HIV negative. Why do we wait until the problems affect our lives to become involved?”