

MIRUDA

Charles Byaruhanga has been trained as a peer counselor through MIRUDA, which AIM has supported with a grant, materials, and technical assistance.



Photos: Joe Rosenbloom



With AIM support, MIRUDA has been able to fund theatrical troupes which use dance and song to inform community members about HIV and other critical health issues.

“You should have something to do, because HIV is not the end of your life. You should work. You should have projects.”

— CHARLES BYARUHANGA

Charles Byaruhanga suspected that he might have the AIDS virus, but he hesitated to be tested for it. If he was positive, he believed that he would become desperately sick and that the people in his village of Kyomukama would shun him. A message broadcast on a local radio station, however, eased his fears. “It talked about how people with HIV could get help and how they could still live and work,” Byaruhanga recalls.

He gathered his courage and agreed to the test. It showed that he was indeed HIV positive. Counselors at the hospital assured him that he could live a long time if he took drugs to ward off the opportunistic infections that strike people with HIV and generally looked after his health.

That was five years ago. Byaruhanga has not become ill. But he has been struggling with another problem: how to earn enough money to support his family and pay for his medications. His part-time job as a truck driver transporting vegetables and other foodstuffs from farm to market gradually came to an end. His prospects for earning a living seemed bleak.

In 2004, Byaruhanga sought help from MIRUDA (Mid-Western Uganda Integrated

Rural Development Agency), a nongovernmental organization based in the town of Kagadi, 10 kilometers from Kyomukama. Founded in 1998, MIRUDA pursues HIV/AIDS prevention-and-care initiatives in the Kibaale district of mid-western Uganda.

Volunteers recruited by MIRUDA distribute HIV/AIDS information and condoms, organize workshops for public health instruction, and promote HIV testing and counseling.

MIRUDA also sponsors a troupe of young singers, drummers and dancers, whose music conveys warnings about AIDS. “Abstain. If you can’t abstain, use condoms,” is the refrain of one song the group performs at public events.

Another program run by MIRUDA and supported by an AIM grant boosts the income-generating potential of people impacted by HIV/AIDS, particularly children orphaned or otherwise made vulnerable by the disease. Byaruhanga has benefited from that program. Slender and mild-mannered, he is 37 years old, the eldest son of a cattle farmer who has five wives and 29 children. Byaruhanga maintains two households for his two wives and 12 children. In 2004, to help him feed his family, MIRUDA gave



Program director, Moses Byaruhanga (left) meets with two of MIRUDA's peer counselors, Yamini Rukyalekere and Charles Byaruhanga outside the MIRUDA headquarters in Kagadi, Kibaale District.

him two pigs, which have produced 18 piglets, as well as seeds and an irrigation tank for the garden he tends in Kyomukama.

In a small shop that he has opened, Byaruhanga sells carrots, tomatoes, and other vegetables that he grows. He also raises hens and sells the fresh eggs. "You should have something to do," he says, "because HIV is not the end of your life. You should work. You should have projects."

That is the message that Byaruhanga has been trumpeting since he volunteered to work as a peer counselor for MIRUDA two years ago. "We get training so that we can explain to people who are HIV-positive that they can live positively," he says. One of his tasks has been to distribute condoms in his village and show people how to use them properly. Another goal has been working to overcome people's reluctance to be tested for HIV.

MIRUDA has trained 13 other peer counselors besides Byaruhanga. They are

AIM'S ROLE	Provided funding, technical assistance, capacity building, and equipment
TOTAL GRANT	Ush 60,590,250
CONTRACT PERIOD	June 2003 to December 2005
ACTIVITIES SUPPORTED BY AIM	Condoms Home-based care Targeted population prevention Drama groups
OTHER DONORS	American Embassy AIDLink/Ireland

scattered throughout the eight sub-counties of Kibaale District, encompassing an impoverished rural population of 230,000.

What people fear, Byaruhanga says, is the stigma that attaches to those who test positive. "When I tell them to be tested, they say, 'We fear very much what will happen to us if we learn that we have HIV.' I tell them that if they test positive, there is medicine for them to take. They can live a long and useful life." ■