

## Working with Masai Youth to Stop the Spread of AIDS in Kenya

EngenderHealth Staff

In a Maasai village in Kenya, the paramount elder listens, as men and women, young and old, discuss the threat of AIDS in their community. They talk candidly about how traditional practices put them at great risk. Young people offer advice to elders -- unheard of among the Maasai. Finally, the paramount elder speaks. He reminds the attendees of the Maasai initiation ritual in which young men kill a lion to prove their manhood. He tells them that today, AIDS is their lion, and that to conquer it, they cannot work alone: they must attack it as a community. He announces that he will speak to all of the region's elders, to share what he has learned.



Keith Edwards with a Masai Elder

### The Beginnings

This HIV/AIDS workshop would not have happened were it not for EngenderHealth's Keith Edwards. Edwards was on a two-year assignment as a financial administrator in EngenderHealth's Nairobi office when he met a young man named Sammy Oinyiaku. Edwards now believes fate brought the two together. "Things fell into place too easily," I hadn't expected the position in Nairobi. It was a big honor. Then, my house sold in just a few days! It seemed there was some larger reason for me to go."

At first, it was difficult to adjust to life in Kenya. As an African-American, he had expected the transition to be smooth, but as a non-Swahili-speaking black person, things were complicated. "I wasn't just another white expatriate, and I wasn't a Kenyan, so it was hard to fit in."

### Learning to Listen

At work, this was also true. "I was responsible for EngenderHealth's financial interests in all of East Africa -- a very big job. I thought if I gave people authority, things would get done. I was wrong!" In Kenya, workers defer to their bosses, just as villagers defer to their elders. "When I held a meeting, they would clam up, especially in groups."

Edwards' management style came directly from his experiences with EngenderHealth programs like COPE and Facilitative Supervision. He expected his employees would want to take ownership in their jobs. "But cultural attitudes are hard to change, so instead of meetings, I talked to people one-on-one. This helped them feel more comfortable, and slowly things got better."

### Out in the Field

Edwards' new position brought opportunity. "Even though I wasn't a doctor, field workers would ask me to come along on trips." What he saw changed his attitudes about his work and his life. "In clinics, the beds are all very close together. There's no privacy. Patients' relatives wash clothes and bed linens in the yard. As administrators, we think about getting the money, not about the barriers that field workers face when they try to set up a program."

### Effecting Change

Seeing the conditions, especially HIV/AIDS clinics, made Edwards determined to help. Then, one day, Sammy Oinyaku came to see Edwards. Oinyaku had founded an organization called MAPNet (Maasai AIDS Prevention Network) to provide AIDS education to Maasai youth, and was looking for funding. "There was no money in the budget for grassroots organization, so I decided use my own money. It seemed too important to wait."

### A Little Bit Goes a Long Way

Oinyaku needed basic training materials, and money for food and transportation, a significant expense in a country with poor roads and few vehicles. Edwards figures he spent about \$400 on the first session. "Masai practices put them at great risk for contracting infections," explains Edwards. "During initiation rites, one knife is used to circumcise several men. Also, Maasai men who don't share their wives are considered selfish, and are ostracized. Ironically, once someone contracts AIDS, they are also ostracized -- and left to die alone."

In the workshops, these and other dangerous practices were discussed openly. The Maasai youth realized that without changing long-held beliefs, their community would be decimated. But to make real change, they would have to approach the elders.

### The New "Elder"

Edwards helped Oinyaku organize a workshop with the elders, where the group discussed HIV and treatment strategies. At the end of the session, the paramount elder gave Edwards a long, thin, wrapped gift." Inside was a walking stick. "It signified that I was now considered an elder."

Keith Edwards is quick to credit EngenderHealth. "I did this from my pocket, but because of EngenderHealth, I was in a position to help. You never know where something's going to lead," Edwards concludes. "But when you take a risk with a small group that has a clear goal, the rewards can be huge. Anyone can be part of good works. You just have to find what your part is."

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