



U.S. Agency for International Development

Bureau for Global Health

SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

Radio Soap Opera Encourages Safer Sexual Behavior to Prevent HIV/AIDS among Ethiopia’s Young Adults

THE RADIO SERIAL DRAMA *Journey Through Life* is designed to persuade young Ethiopian adults to practice safe behaviors to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy and HIV/AIDS. The series was a huge hit in its first season. Besides citing its entertainment value, 90 percent of targeted listeners reported the series changed their health behaviors in positive ways.

With only one percent of the world’s population, Ethiopia has a stunning nine percent of the worldwide cases of HIV/AIDS. The disease is devastating the country and destroying individual lives, families, and entire communities. More than 700,000 Ethiopian children have been orphaned and over a million people have already died from AIDS.

The U.S. Agency for International Development supported the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health/Center for Communication Programs to work with the National Office of Population in Ethiopia to develop the initial radio series and will continue its support of the popular drama with its clear, simple messages about how to prevent HIV infection and practice healthy behaviors.

The success of the radio soap opera is a tribute to the principles of “entertainment education.” The creators of *Journey Through Life* selected characters with whom the audience could identify—some vulnerable and others empowered, as they took actions to protect themselves from unwanted sex and disease. The story lines of 26 episodes were packed with real-life situations addressing unsafe sex, abstinence, family planning, condoms, polygamy, abstinence, stigma, sexually transmitted disease, and religion.

While the series was designed specifically to appeal to young married couples and single adolescents in urban and semi-urban areas of the country, all age groups found the drama episodes entertaining, educational, and popular. Listeners said they related to the characters and the challenges they face in practicing healthier behaviors. For example, one listener said, “I know now that AIDS is transmitted through sexual intercourse. The radio program also helped me evaluate myself on the role I personally play to prevent and control the spread of HIV/AIDS.”

One subplot involves a husband and wife who discover that they are both infected with HIV after the husband’s affair with an HIV-positive sex worker. The story segues into the plight of AIDS orphans in Ethiopia, and the couple begins to reflect on how their disease will ultimately affect their two children. The episode ends with their decision to visit the voluntary counseling and testing center they have heard about in Addis Ababa for help as they begin to confront the reality of how HIV/AIDS will affect them and their children. The listening audience is invited to tune in next week to hear how the counseling session goes.

“I always listen to *Journey of Life*; radio is reliable and most people have them, whereas only the educated can read the newspaper and only the rich have TVs.”
—Asfaw, a young listener to *Journey of Life*



Photo courtesy of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health/Center for Communication Programs

Ato Araya Demissie, Country Representative, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health/Center for Communication Programs, receives numerous health contest entries in response to the broadcast of *Journey Through Life*.

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Participants in the evaluation of the program appeared to be profoundly and deeply affected by the first season of *Journey Through Life*. The radio program caused them to change their behaviors, seek out additional information, talk to others about taboo subjects, and advocate for healthy behaviors. There was a unanimous call for the program to continue because it helped listeners understand, cope with, and protect themselves against HIV/AIDS infection and from having a larger family than they wanted.

Ethiopia, May 2003