Luckmore Pamhizai is not your average 23-year old male. In fact, is one of the leading lights in his community of Mt. Darwin in Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe. You see Luckmore is one of those unique individuals who use their life experiences and lived reality, hard as it might be, to find their purpose in life, and then sets out to positively impact the lives of others around him. “I am driven by the need to ensure that young people like myself can live a life that is full and meaningful, regardless if you have HIV or not. I want people to know that even after 23 years of living with HIV, I’m Still Standing Strong. In fact I’m thriving.” Having been born with HIV, he knows full well the impact to one’s health and overall well-being if you are not able to access the necessary HIV testing and treatment. Celebrating his very low viral load, he is full of energy and enthusiasm about his future.

A full time student, he is also a trained HIV counsellor, the Deputy National Facilitator in Northern Region for Young People’s Network on SRHR and HIV (YPNSRHHA), Community Adolescent Supporter with Africaid Zvandir and a National representative for young people living with HIV. Luckmore is currently studying towards obtaining a degree in Social Work at the University of Zimbabwe, which he plans to put to good use in his outreach campaigns in his community. “I have actually seen how my studies have helped me gain more confidence in dealing with the issues that we come across in different communities. Not everyone’s issues are the same, so we need to adapt our campaigns to the different needs or realities of young people on the ground.” He believes that sometimes efforts by various organisations working on the ground are not met with success, as they incorrectly assume that young people are one large homogenous group, which is in fact not the case.

“Young people have different needs. You can go to one place and the culture is different, so you need to listen and then adapt to their needs to actually address the real issues that they are facing. A one size fits all approach does not work with young people.” Tackling these differences and getting young people to commit their time and attention during workshops meant that Luckmore has to come up with innovative ideas to capture the imagination of the adolescents and young people. “I had to ensure that we created safe spaces where they felt that they could express themselves freely, without judgement or attitude.” This led him to using movies or national and international sporting events as a way to bring young people together. “We quickly realised that if we wanted to share information on issues such as SRHR, HIV, early child marriage or GBV for example that we needed to find a way to share this information during the match breaks or before or after the movies.” Another key intervention that has worked will, has been the introduction of integrated youth clubs. This sees young boys and girls initially meeting separately to discuss issues such as toxic vs positive masculinity, gender based violence, attitudes towards the opposite sex, acceptable vs unacceptable behaviour towards the opposite sex and menstrual and sexual health etc. “We know from experience that if you just put boys and girls together in a room and expect them to open up about the issues that are uniquely impacting them, they just clam up and go quiet. But if you separate them at first, they are more open to talking and sharing and you can discuss the issues a little deeper.” The group is then integrated and the key issues that were raised are shared in a very respectful and positive way. Luckmore says that the feedback and response to this approach has been hugely positive. So much so, that the approach is also being offered to caregivers too.
With an estimated 200,000 plus young people between the ages of 13 to 24 in Luckmore’s community, the need for SRHR and HIV information and services is even more critical. “Here in Mt. Darwin we are close to an artisanal mining community, and because of this we are seeing high rates of transactional sex, early child marriage and increases in HIV and STI cases. But access to information and services remains a massive challenge. Which is why we are out there every week, sharing information, undertaking advocacy campaigns and pushing for better planning and policy implementation, so that we can start to see reductions in these social and health issues.” He admits though that reductions come down to attitude and behaviour change. “Our main objective is to address attitude and behaviour changes on both sides. Once our youth officers have engaged with young people we then refer them to other larger organisations such as the National Aids Council who are able to provide more comprehensive services.”

However, much of these services were disrupted during the Covid-19 lockdown that impacted every country across the globe. “When we went into lockdown everything came to a standstill. But young people still needed access to information, reproductive services and testing. As an organisation we managed to distribute condoms to young people in the community.” What this interaction however highlighted was the lack of information around the coronavirus and which led to many young people falsely believing that they were not a risk of catching the virus. This led to Luckmore researching what platforms he could use to ensure that he continued to assist young people with information on SRHR, HIV, STIs, GBV or the Coronavirus. He duly launched the Youth Health Matters podcast on Wordpress, which he then shared over various social media platforms.

Combining advocacy with information sharing through a lens of meaningful young participation, the podcast has become a big hit with young people. “I recall that one week I was a little late in sharing the latest podcast and I received so many emails asking me when the next podcast was going to be shared. I was pleasantly surprised to realise that young people were actually anticipating what I was going to share next.” When asked about his most memorable podcast, several came to mind, but the engagement about abortion rights and services in Zimbabwe garnered the most engagement by young people to date. “When you consider what is happening in terms of the diminishing right of women to exercise their sexual reproductive health rights across the world and the challenges we face in our country, then it was understandable why it resonated with so many young people.”

But the campaign that is dearest to his heart is the #IAmStillStandingStrong campaign that is a dedication to his personal HIV story and journey. “I wanted people to know that there is no reason to stigmatise or discriminate against people living with HIV. There are many young people like myself who are strong, healthy and not just surviving but thriving.” Luckmore believed that it was especially important to share and reinforce these messages of positivity during the Covid-19 lockdown where many young people were feeling isolated and disconnected.

It was these campaigns and ongoing community work that made Luckmore stand out after being nominated as a potential candidate for the SAT Adolescent Activism Awards (AAA). When he was awarded the title of overall Zimbabwe national country winner in the regional competition he was elated. “I was so humbled and honoured just to be nominated with so
many other capable young people. But I’m really grateful to the adjudicators who were able to see the impact that my activism has had in my community. Sometimes you can start to feel overwhelmed by the work and then when you get recognition like this you are rejuvenated to go back and do even more.” His greatest ability it seems is problem solving. “I like to define the problem and then I work to come up with solutions.” He has put this to good use in the past where he was able to rally support, products and services from local businesses who would be prepared to provide venues, refreshments, sound equipment, all the items that initially seemed as impediments to creating opportunities for community outreach. Having won it seems, has propelled him to do even more. When asked about how he plans to reinvest his winnings from the awards, he shares that he has already undertaken a youth outreach event for Day of the Girl Child and has several other events lined up. For Day of the Girl Child he mobilised young girls to dance and share poetry as part of his information sharing event. For his other events he plans to invite the MP along with community cadres, local health officials, district development coordinators, as well as the district medical officer for HIV and SRHR. “So we will be stretching every cent to ensure that we reach the maximum number of influencers and young people.”

Looking ahead Luckmore’s thoughts turn to the passion and agency of young people across the continent. He is adamant that there will be not future without effectively addressing the sexual reproductive health rights and needs of young people. “It’s fundamental if you want to harness the demographic dividend. As young people we face huge challenges in terms of access to information and services. This is exacerbated by the gaps between planning and policy implementation.” Although he believes there is a long way to go, he remains optimistic about the impact that young people can have when they are given he space to meaningfully participate in issues that impact them and their futures. #IAmStillStandingStrong

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