



The tears of Africa

BY EDWARD THOMSON
Special to The Times

ONE day last February, my village had five funerals. We are a village of 300, and one funeral is enough, but that day there were five. A hot wind was blowing from Mozambique, shaking the thickets, covering us with dust.

My family arrived at the cemetery in two processions, one for my uncle, the other for his sister. My uncle's six children and my aunt's two children were all crying. I know how they felt. The week before, I had wept at my father's funeral.

AIDS, my friend, is a terrible thing.

My village is Senzani, in central Malawi, a little country shaped like a goat's hind leg. Surrounding us are the giant nations of Tanzania, Zambia and Mozambique. We are a farming people, maybe the poorest in all of Africa. My family earns no more than \$5 a month.

I was 12 when the five funerals happened, but I have known about AIDS since I was 7, the year I lost my aunt and my good friend, Kalipo, to the disease.

Kalipo was a truck driver. On short trips, he would let me ride along. On long trips, to Tanzania or Zambia, he would bring me gifts of soda, bread and eggs. My first ambition was to be a truck driver, like Kalipo. He was 30 when he died.

After my aunt died of AIDS, I wrote a poem about my feelings. An American journalist visiting my village heard me recite my poem. I'm shy and don't like to speak loudly, especially in English. But when she asked to film me reciting my poem, I raised my voice.

*AIDS, my friend, AIDS
is very dangerous.
AIDS, my friend, AIDS
is very dangerous.*

*Look how naked
The world has become.
Empty houses all around,
Children without parents
Crying day and night
But with no answer.*

*AIDS, my friend, AIDS
is very dangerous.*



JON KRAUSE / OP ART

*People with good papers,
Have gone completely.
Please teachers,
Government officials,
Nurses, and the clergy,
Teach the nation about AIDS.*

*AIDS, my friend, AIDS
Is very dangerous.*

Many people in the United States saw me on their televisions. That is why I'm in Seattle now, reciting and talking about the crisis in Africa. When people ask, "Edward, who are you?" I tell them: I am a boy in the eighth grade who loves to read. When I sit at school, my toe twitches to kick a soccer ball. My hero is the great Ronaldo of Brazil.

In my house, there is no heating, electricity or plumbing. My mother sleeps in one room and my two younger brothers, my sister and I sleep in the other. All but my sister, who is 3, work on the village farm. We grow red beans, maize, sweet potatoes, peanuts, tomatoes and cassava. My father pushed me to learn English and to read poetry. Malawi was once British, and we are proud of English things — cars, clothes and the English language. In Senzani, though, some think you pompous when you speak English.

I have lost three aunts, one uncle and

my friend, Kalipo, to AIDS. My father? We are not sure. One morning, he awoke with a strange swelling on his leg. He died one week later. Maybe it was AIDS, maybe not.

Now in Senzani, many houses are empty. A week doesn't pass without a funeral. What will become of my village? What will become of the children?

In his State of the Union address last week, President Bush told Americans about our AIDS problem in Africa. How hospitals turn away the sick — "You have AIDS? We have no medicines. Go home and die." When he said that the U.S. wished to buy medicines for 2 million people suffering from AIDS, I shuddered. If it's true, millions of children would be spared from becoming orphans. This is the most precious gift.

But it's too late for my aunts and my uncle. It's too late for Kalipo.

Tomorrow, the first anniversary of my father's death, I will go to Garfield High School and recite my poems. "Ladies and gentlemen," I will tell the students, "how would you feel if you saw your family and friends die, one by one?"

Let's imagine together: If all the HIV viruses were one virus, what a big virus it would be; if all the axes were one ax, what a big ax it would be; and if all the men were one man what a big man he would be. If that big man took that big ax and cut that big HIV, we could defeat AIDS.

If you can imagine the problem, you can solve it.

My friends, AIDS is a terrible thing.

Edward Thomson, 13, is a student in Senzani, Malawi. His poem was featured in "The aWAKE Project," along with essays by Nelson Mandela and Bono, and on television. His visit to Seattle is being sponsored by World Vision, a Christian humanitarian organization, in Federal Way. World Vision's Conrad Wesselhoft assisted Edward in writing his story in English.

