Adela Mugabo 29.1.25

Emma: My name is Emma Woods and I'm recording with Adela for George House Trust, and it is the 29th of January 2025**.** So, Adela, could you please tell me about your early life. Where were you born and when?

Adela: So I grew up in East Africa in Uganda, although I have some roots in Rwanda, but I grew up in Uganda. And then in 2002 I moved to the UK, and I was living in— London. That's where I was diagnosed with HIV, and then— I moved to Manchester in 2003 and that's when I got in touch with George House Trust.

Emma: So what was life like for you in Uganda? What were your parents like and what did they do for work?

Adela: Yeah, I— we were many children in our home. It was full of love and laughter, and I was lucky that all my parents were alive. Yeah. I had never lived outside any other country until when I was, I think, six years, and then— until when I moved to the UK. So moving to the UK was completely something I didn't know about anyway, and the cold and the setting**,** culture shock and yeah. So that was me moving to the UK, yeah, but it was in 2003.

Emma: So in your childhood home, if we go back to Uganda, did you live in a city, or was it a smaller neighbourhood?

Adela: No, it was in the village. I grew up in the village, and I thought there was— I didn't know that there was any other life apart from the life we lived in the village. It was a village set up. We went to school until when you are like thirteen years. That's when you go to boarding school, and that's when you move from home. So from— when I were thirteen, I was in our home in the village, and that was the best life I think I've ever had. Everything was like, as organic as you can think about. Like you don't think there is any other life apart from what you are living. So I used to think that that was the best life, like any other young person would live. I didn't know about— we didn't have a TV, we didn't know that other people live a— actually better life, I should say, yeah. So I thought that was the life that everybody lived.

Emma: Could you tell me more about your home life? What makes you think it was the best life you could have lived?

Adela: Because everybody, like, when we went to school, we all had the same level of income, should I say? So we didn't have people who are rich and who are poor and whatever. We all— it was the same story. We all ate the same food. We all put on the same uniform. So there wasn't anything like, you envy the other family or whatever, because all of us were almost the same. Compared to now, where you see people who are very rich and people who are very poor. I didn't see that. And because I didn't have TV, I wouldn't see, you know, like the way they show nowadays on TV - very poor people, wars and everything, and then very rich. I didn't have that picture. I just had a picture of me and my friends and my relatives. And the good thing, we grew up with our cousins. So all my uncles and my aunties lived in the same area, so I went to school with my cousins and during the weekend I would be with my cousins. So I lived with my aunties. So it was having love around wherever

we would go in the village. There would be— I would find my relatives. I think that was the best part of it.

Emma: You said you had a big family, a lot of siblings?

Adela: I'm the last born— and because I'm the last born, and there were nine children, my nephews and my nieces are almost my age. So by the time I think I was born, my brother was already - our eldest brother - was already married. So I grew up with— my nephews, actually, if I'm— maybe I'm three years older than them. So I grew up with my— actually, especially me, I grew up [more] with my nieces and my nephews than my sisters and brothers. I think between me and my little brother, the one I followed is like five years gap. So— I didn't really grow up with my siblings because they would have gone to boarding schools. So I grew up with my nephews and my nieces, actually.

Emma: And what about your parents? What did they do for work?

Adela: My mother was a housewife. Of course, was a housewife. And then— my father was a civil servant. Yeah.

Emma: So you went to school, and then you went to boarding school at thirteen. At your first school, your primary school, do you remember any, like, teachers and friends? Or what you enjoyed studying?

Adela: I used to like history, I don't know. And eventually I think I wanted to be a lawyer. Now, I think that's why I needed— I liked history so much. I used to do well in history and geography. I wasn't good— at doing like sciences and whatever. But biology, funnily enough, I did well in biology. But I liked history. I liked geography. I liked English, although my English is not the best English, but I liked reading, like, novels. So in our class we would have English lessons. Would be reading some books, like a passage? Is it called a passage? No, a paragraph - sorry. So each of us would read a paragraph. And I used to like it, like reading and hearing my voice when I'm reading, you know, English. So English was my best. Mathematics wasn't my best at all. Up to now, I don't like it, but yeah.

Emma: And then what was it like when you went to boarding school when you were thirteen? What was that change like?

Adela: I was looking forward, because I didn't want to stay at home. I was looking forward to go out, and kind of— there was some kind of independence, because you leave home, you go alone, you start something new, like new life. But yeah, after like three months, I realized that actually going to boarding school wasn't the best. The food wasn't good, I would be missing home. But at the same time I met many friends from different country. Because what happens you come from— for instance, we live in Manchester. So you'd get some people coming from Liverpool, coming from Newcastle, coming from Leeds. So, I was able to mix with other people that I would never have met if I didn't go to a boarding school. Yeah.

Emma: You said you were excited to go because you didn't want to stay home. Why was that?

Adela: Yeah, I think anybody would feel like you want to go out. You want to see what is happening outside your home. So I was looking forward. And also going to school, in primary school we used to walk. So that means walking three, like, miles going to school and three miles coming back. So every day, I used to walk six miles to school, and yeah. So that was one of the things I didn't like going to school because of that journey we had to walk. There was nothing like here. Here nowadays they have school busses and whatever. No, we used to walk to school, and, yeah, from school and then back home in the evening. So one of the things I wanted to go to boarding school was that I didn't want to walk to school anymore.

Emma: And what did you do for sort of fun? Or did you have any hobbies when you were younger?

Adela: Yeah. I think if I was living in Britain, I would be a footballer. I used to like football so much, like during break time I would be playing football. And one time I was a goalkeeper. And then sometimes I would be, whatever you call them, but I will be playing football. I liked playing football. And I also played javelins - you know, like the one you-— throw it like a spear, kind of? Yeah. So I like javelin and football.

Emma: So how long were you at boarding school for? When did you leave school?

Adela: So— in Uganda, I don't think it has changed. So you go to school, boarding school. It's called secondary school, actually. You go for four years, and then after what we call O-Level - four years - then you go to A-Level for two years. So normally it is the same school, like you could change after S4, senior four, but I stayed in the same school. So from O-Level to A-Level. Those are six years.

Emma: Do you remember what A levels you studied, what subjects?

Adela: I studied, history, literature and geography.

Emma: And did you go to uni afterwards?

Adela: No, I didn't. Instead, I did journalism. I went to a school of journalism, and I did a diploma in journalism. Because actually, it is something also I wanted to do when I used to have my dream. I wanted to be a radio presenter. I wanted to be an air hostess and a lawyer. But—

[TRACK ENDS SO THAT EMMA CAN CHANGE THE RECORDER BATTERIES]

Emma: Sorry we had some issues with batteries but we are back. So you were talking about wanting to be a lawyer?

Adela: Yeah, I— you know when you are young, you have your dreams. But I think I wanted— first of all, I wanted to do a radio presenter. Because although we didn't have TV, we used to listen to radio. My father would listen to radio so I would hear women, you know, presenters. So, I wanted to be a— radio presenter, and then an air hostess, and then a lawyer. But then the law— part of it, I think eventually— because there weren't many women who were lawyers, so that one somehow

slipped away from me. And yeah. So after A-Level, I got a job with radio, with a certain radio, so I actually worked as a radio presenter. And then that's when I was inspired actually to do journalism. So I did a diploma in journalism.

Emma: What sort of journalism did you do?

Adela: I think now it is called mass communication, you know, it was general. So we studied advertising, we studied PR, we studied communication. I can't remember, it's a long time ago. So it was reporting, radio presenting, TV and that print media and that kind of stuff. So— but the course was called journalism, anyway.

Emma: And when you came back from boarding school, did you go back and live with your parents? Or did you move out?

Adela: No, you would go back during holidays. So would go for three months. I think, we didn't have what we call— what are they called here? I've forgotten how we would call them, but we had terms. So every— each term had three months. So for instance, if you went to in January, you come back in April, stay at home like for a month, go back in May, come— back in August, go back in September, and then come back in December, do you know(??). So I used to go back to my parents, definitely. Yeah.

Emma: And did you live with them once— you were working as a journalist, or did you move out?

Adela: No, when I got a job as a journalist I moved out of my parents' home. Then I was living with my sister. And then at one point I was living in a hostel, yeah.

Emma: How come you were living in a hostel?

Adela: Yeah, it was expensive for me to rent a house, a flat. And also, because of our cultures, somehow a young girl should meant to be living alone by that time. That's how I used to see it(??), that either you are with your parents, or you get married and live with your husband. So it wasn't like I could get my own flat, kind of. I couldn't even think about it. So one time, I was living with my sister, and then I went to a hostel, and then eventually actually got my own flat, yeah.

Emma: So you mentioned that it was expected that a girl would marry and live with the husbands. Did you not want to get married?

Adela: Yeah, I wanted, yeah. Eventually I did, actually, I got married. Yeah.

Emma: Did you have any sort of relationships when you were younger, when you were working as a journalist?

Adela: Yeah, but my father used to tell us that the moment we get pregnant, we shouldn't step in his house. So it was something you had to be very, very careful about, knowing that if you come back pregnant then you'll never step at home anymore. So that was like— every day when you are going out, that's what your father will be telling you, you know, yeah.

Emma: So at what point did you move to the UK?

Adela: I moved in 2002, I think in September, except that I don't want to talk about, you know, what happened. That story is traumatic. And, yeah, but I moved in 2002.

Emma: You moved in 2002. You moved to London, you said?

Adela: Yeah. So I was in London, and I think I came in September. And then I stayed in London with a friend up to 2003 March, that's when I moved to Manchester. There was— the way immigration, like you can be moved from one— they used to call it dispersal. So I was dispersed to Manchester. And it is in in London that I was diagnosed with HIV, because when you go to the Home Office and when they are doing the processes and everything you will be tested. And then I was tested, and that's when I found out that I was living with HIV. So by the time I came from London to Manchester, I had— they had given me like, a list of all the organisations that are in Manchester. So when I came, I had the hospital, I had the organisations. There were three organisations I think by that time. And yeah, that's how I moved to Manchester in 2003 I think, in March.

Emma: So when you were diagnosed with HIV in London, was that the first time you'd heard of HIV?

Adela: No I've heard of HIV because in Africa, of course, there is a high number of people living with HIV. So I've heard of that. I have heard of it. But in most cases, you think it's not going to be you with HIV. You think of other people, but not yourself.

Emma: Do you remember when you first heard about HIV and how that came about?

Adela: In Uganda, because they tried— actually, by that time the President, who is still the president of Uganda, tried to raise awareness about HIV. They used to go to schools. They used to have— on radio you would hear more about HIV. The billboards up to now, since that time, we have so many billboards. When you get to the airport, the first thing you see is some information, some messages about HIV. So, I've heard of it. But I think sometimes when you don't have an illness, you don't really think about it, or read about it a lot, because you don't think it is part of you. But I was aware of it, that it is there. Yeah.

Emma: Did the diagnosis come as a shock, or were you feeling unwell?

Adela: I can't even remember, but— yeah. First of all, I had given birth. I had a child by the time I was diagnosed. I had a child who was eleven years by that time. And by that time, they weren't testing us. So, I wasn't tested. My husband was— my late husband wasn't tested. I wasn't tested. So I don't know at which point I got HIV— and to be honest, it didn't matter how I got it or when I had it. Yeah.

Emma: So how did HIV change your life?

Adela: I think sometimes people don't want to hear it, but to be honest it was a wake-up call for me. I didn't know the strength in me. I didn't know I could do better things. I didn't know I could help other people. I didn't know I could achieve things. But the moment I was diagnosed with HIV, I don't know. It was a wake-up call for me. And, yeah. The first like one month, I wasn't sure of what was going on. You know, when you don't know your way around, like, how long am I going to live? I have this boy who is eleven years, how is he going to grow? That's my most worry, was actually my son, not myself. I didn't care about myself. I cared about my son. I grew up with my parents. I wanted my son to be with his parents. I wanted to be there for him, and I was looking at him I'm like, how are you going to grow up alone? So, it was [more] about my son than myself. But because in London, they had— in the clinic, actually, you would meet somebody living with HIV from there and then. I think that was very, very useful. So I met a certain lady, I think she was from Kenya. And so they were very, very supportive - like they would just receive you, and they would be around you, and they would take you to different support groups and that kind of stuff. So that one really empowered me to stay positive.

Emma: Do— what sort of services were you provided in London? You said there was some peer support?

Adela: Yeah, it was peer support. They were different— by that time there was enough funding for HIV services, so there were like six, seven support groups. If you wanted, every day you could go to a different support group. So, you go to East— London, you go to North London, you go to South London, you go to West London. There were different organisations. THT[1], Positively UK, Positive East. There was another organisation in— Lewisham, you know. There were— even in— Kennington I think there was also another organisation. So there were different organisations. And different organisations were offering different services. Others had newly diagnosed course(??). Others had like massage. Others you would go to support groups, they were in— go to women's group, then the African group. And there were always different services and support about even diet, about— so get like information about diet, actually receiving a dietitian. You know, there was a lot going on that would help you to stay positive.

Emma: Did it change anything about your work? So, when you moved to the UK, did you continue working as a journalist?

Adela: No, I didn't continue. Because actually— when I came to the UK, that's what I wanted to say. I was an asylum seeker. Things had completely turned upside down. I had lost my husband and that kind of stuff. So when I came here, I came as an asylum seeker. I wasn't allowed to work, but I continued volunteering. Yeah.

Emma: And where did you volunteer?

Adela: So in London, I've forgotten the name of the organisation, but it's— I think, in short it was VSO. But it was an HIV charity, so that's where I started volunteering from. I would do, like facilitate. We used to have support groups, so I would be

[1] Terrence Higgins Trust

facilitating, printing. By that time I think we would send out letters, so I would do some admin work. Yeah, that's where I started volunteering from in London.

Emma: Why do you think you chose to stop volunteering with the HIV charity, of all the others?

Adela: Yeah, because I was supported. I was received. So I wanted to give back, you know. Yeah, it's a place that I felt home. It's a place I felt I wasn't judged. And, yeah, everybody was empathetic. And yeah, so I wanted to give back as well.

Emma: So you obviously said you were an asylum seeker. How long did it take for your status to be granted?

Adela: Oh, ten years. And I don't think I want to talk about the hell of living for ten years. You're not allowed to work. I had left my son back home; I didn't come with him. I didn't have family. And for ten years, the only thing I was allowed to do was to study, like not even up to university. I could do some courses at college, which I did, and that's all I could do, and volunteering.

Emma: And through that ten years, you ended up in Manchester. You said the Home Office sort of placed you here?

Adela: Yeah, so there's something— there used to be a programme. I don't know if they're still using it. It's called dispersal of asylum seekers. So I was dispersed to Manchester. I didn't know anybody in Manchester. I knew about Manchester because of my son, however young he was, he knew about football. So he used to tell me about Manchester— not City, Manchester United. So he would talk about Manchester United. I wasn't into football, but somehow I knew Manchester and then football. So the only thing I knew about Manchester was football. You know, nothing else. So I moved to Manchester. Yeah, that's how I found myself in Manchester.

Emma: And did you, were you provided with any support services as a woman who is HIV positive in Manchester?

Adela: So when I was coming, one of the organisations, I think it was— it's called Positive East now, I think by that time it was called the Globe Centre. They printed everything for me. They gave me all the contact numbers of all the services in Manchester. There were three organisations by that time. There was George House Trust, there was Body Positive, there was a Black Health Agency. So they gave me their telephone numbers, and they gave me a hospital. All the hospitals. I think still there were not many. I think it was North Manchester, and I think the Hathersage maybe. So I contacted North Manchester hospital myself when I came to Manchester, and they gave me an appointment. And then I called George House Trust, and they gave me an appointment. But I didn't know how to go there. And because I'd come from Africa, I didn't know that a city could be having like, different bus stations. So I was living in Ashton-under-Lyne, and I thought, Ashton-under-Lyne bus station that was the only bus station. So when I went there, they had given me the number of the bus. And I was told in Ashton that, “No, this bus doesn't come here”. And I was like, “How? I was told that I need to get this bus!”. I didn't know that

I needed to travel from Ashton to Piccadilly Gardens and then get another bus to George House Trust. But that's how I found my services around, and yeah.

Emma: And when did you first become involved with HIV activism in Manchester?

Adela: So because of what I had seen in Manchester— actually, when I was even in London, I did a training in positive speaking. So by the time I came to Manchester, somehow I had started doing something. And I think I realised in London there were more role models, but I didn't find them in Manchester - especially from the African community. But in London, I had seen many women and men who were positive speakers, who were volunteering, who were helping other people to live well with HIV. So when I came, when I registered with George House Trust and Body Positive, straight away I started volunteering. And I was involved in different things here at George House Trust. I remember I did training for positive speakers. So I started positive speaking. At Body Positive, I used to facilitate the African group. Also at Black Health Agency, I used to facilitate the African group. Like, to lead it as a volunteer. So that's when I got involved in and learning more about HIV and understanding the challenges that people living with HIV face. And, yeah, to learn about how to look after myself and how to empower myself in order to continue living, yeah.

Emma: What— how did training as a positive speaker make you feel?

Adela: I think it was— the whole thing was to create awareness and for people to know that— we are not only just living with HIV, we are human beings. We are mothers, we are wives, we are sisters, we are workers, we are nurses, we are just— Because sometimes I think people try to judge anybody or everybody who is living with HIV, to put them in a certain group. I think for us to stand up and say, “I'm here. I'm living with HIV”, was something to show people that we are just human beings like them, except that we are living with HIV.

Emma: And do you remember any sort of specific people or any sort of community that really helped you come to terms with living with HIV in Manchester?

Adela: I don't think— everybody living with HIV was very helpful. When I came to George House Trust, even at Body Positive, we were a mixed group. We had straight people and gay men. Actually most of them were gay men. And gay men really, really supported us. We used to volunteer together. Up now when we meet, I meet them in town, it’s like, “Hello!”. After so many years, like twenty years, we still have— we bonded. We supported each other. And yeah, so everybody really supported us, and these organisations really, really supported us. It was like a home. Imagine— you are in a foreign country. You don't have a friend. When I moved to Manchester, I didn't have a friend whatsoever. But all the friends I have after twenty years, I met them here.

But also the organisation, they really, really cared for us. They received us with an open hand and they treated us equally. We didn't feel like we are discriminated against because of maybe our colour, because of immigration. We were all treated equally and treated well. And I remember because of that, I think like in 2004 I was given an award by Manchester City Council for supporting other women living with

HIV. I remember I used to go to different organisations. So if I went to Body Positive and I found a new person who didn't know about George House Trust, I will tell them about George House Trust. And I will say, “Can we meet at Picadilly and then we can go together?”. If I met somebody at George House Trust who didn't know about Body Positive, I would do the same. So I would like— because that's what happened in London, and we came to know about different services because of our friends and whatever. So when I came here— I kept doing the same.

Emma: So you said that you were granted an award by the City Council for supporting women. What kind of support— were you giving?

Adela: Yeah, like that one, like even— I remember one time we went to the hospital, my friend and I. My friend who unfortunately passed when she returned to South Africa. And we found this lady who was alone in the hospital. She looked distressed, and then she told us she had spent six months in the hospital, and she was diagnosed with HIV. And we asked her if she has— ever heard of any other services. She didn't know about any other services. Maybe by that time hospitals were not referring people, I don't know. So we made an appointment for her that— “You tell the hospital that you are going to cut your hair, and then you will find us”. We told her where to find us. And when she came, we took her to different organisations and also told her where to find an immigration organisation, because I think she had overstayed and— so there was a lot going on. And she didn't know what to do. So we said, “If you get solicitors, they will tell you what you can do, or what are your rights here in this country and that kind of stuff”. So that's what we used to do, like support other women.

Emma: And then what does your work look like at George House Trust? When did you start working here?

Adela: So before I started working here, I continued— throughout my time, even when I got my papers after ten years, I continued volunteering. I became a trustee at George House Trust. At Body Positive, I think I was a service user representative. And then in 2010 I went to university, I think— 2011? So after my degree course, I worked with the NHS. I won’t say which department. And then it was a contract after that, then there was a job going on. I think in 2005, that's when I applied for a job as a Services Advisor, and I got it. And to be honest, it was something I've ever [always] wanted to do. Although I was volunteering, I just had to work with an HIV organisation. That was my goal. I wanted to work for NHS. I wanted to work for an HIV organisation. Because there's— the NHS and HIV support organisations— gave back my life to me. Like treatment, care and everything. So my dream was to work for NHS, which I've done, so that one is ticked. Another dream was to work for an HIV organisation, which I'm doing. So I feel like, yeah. I've done what I've always wanted to do ever since I was diagnosed with HIV. Yeah.

Emma: Can you tell me some of like, the highlights when you look back on your time at George House Trust? What are some bits that really stick out to you?

Adela: It's when we started using George House Trust, how you'll find us downstairs in the training room, like when we had peer groups. So we used to have the women's group, then the African group, then everybody's group. To be honest, it will be like

four days - would call it a market. It was like a market day. It was like an international airport. We all came from different countries - Zimbabwe, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Congo, Nigeria. By that time, there were a few people from actually West Africa, I think. Malawi, da da da [et cetera]. Some people I have never met, actually, in my life. So, would be there. And— we supported each other. We were— it was like reunion, like every week we have where we go. We used to call it— so wouldn't say we are going to George House Trust. So somebody would say, “Where are you going?”. [We would say], “To college”. We used to call it our college, like we all studied. Actually it wasn't a college, it was George House Trust. So it's how many people would come to access the service. And that shows how important this service was, and it still is to people living with HIV. There were so many. We used to come here; we were so many. And also volunteering, like on World AIDS Day, during Pride, you know, talking about HIV, facilitating stalls, like giving out leaflets, talking about HIV, talking about our organisation. And before I went to university, I think I learned a lot from George House Trust because I was volunteering. I was— that's how I came to know about NHS, how it works, different things. But I learnt a lot from here.

Emma: So you mentioned going to university. When did you end up going to university?

Adela: I think I went in 2011. I think 2011.

Emma: And what did you study? Where did you go?

Adela: I did Health and Social Care, but I chose the course because there was public health— promotion. So I wanted still to stay doing the same work almost. And most of the work, my dissertation, everything was about HIV. And I got a first class. So thank you, HIV.

Emma: So my next question was, how has HIV activism changed your life? And you've said it's been very, very positive. Could you tell me more about that?

Adela: Yeah, it has been. I think sometimes we take things for granted, and we think we have a lot of time in this world. Until when I was diagnosed with HIV, I was like, oh my god, I'm running short of time. So I started like, having— setting goals. What do I want to do? What can I do to help other people? Because I think I realised I was taking things for granted. I think, like, support should be there when you need it and that kind of stuff. Until when I was diagnosed with HIV, that's when I realised that actually you could be rejected. There is HIV stigma, there's discrimination. So when people support you, you feel like— that's when I realised that there's some people who are kind. Who can help. And you could do the same. You know, you could help, you could change other people's lives and that kind of stuff. So to me, yeah. It changed me positively, completely positively. Not that I was a bad person or whatever, but I didn't maybe care about others, and not only people living with HIV, every vulnerable person. Yeah.

Emma: So you've obviously achieved two of your goals of NHS and working for HIV organisation. Do you have any hopes or dreams for the future?

Adela: You know, I'm retiring. [laughs]. I'm going to be sixty very soon. So I didn't live with my son because of immigration situation and that kind of stuff. I would want to spend more time with him. I don't know, he's an old man now he's thirty-three year. And, yeah, I want to catch up with him. I want to catch up with him. So, yeah, as I prepare to retire, you know I'm going to be sixty so I know you retire at sixty-seven, but I don't know. [laughs] I don't know. But yeah, I'll see what— happens. Yeah, yeah. I'm thinking, actually, which is very funny. I'm thinking of doing a course - I want to be a DJ. You can't imagine that [laughs].

Emma: [overlapping] I can!

Adela: I want to be a DJ and I want to do a refresher course. I want to go back into radio as well, yeah.

Emma: Is there anything else you'd like to speak about or to add?

Adela: Yeah— just, I'm so grateful to people who campaigned for us. Especially the gay men. We have what we have because of— we have treatment because of the gay men who campaigned for treatment, who volunteered, up to now they are still volunteering for George House Trust and other organisations. All the organisations that I attended, whether in London or in Manchester, most of them— many volunteers were gay men who still give their— 100% of their time to different organisations. So I want to thank them for that. And of course, funders and people who raise money, those who donate their money to us, to people living with HIV. Because one time I asked, I said, “When there is this COVID relief when people are raising money? Don't see people raising money for HIV”. You know, it's very rare to hear about HIV when they are raising money. So if— those people who raise money, who donate, who found grace for us. Thank you very, very much. Yeah. And definitely I need to thank George House Trust for supporting people living with HIV and their families. They've given us back our life. I find it very emotional. Yeah.