

Silvana Gomes dos Santos, 42, HIV-positive

My husband, a former injecting drug user, was diagnosed HIV-positive in 1994 and died a few months later. I discovered that AIDS had killed our youngest son in 1992 and that I had been infected as well. The doctors did not give me more than one year to live.

Since my housekeeper salary was not enough, I had to sell 500 pizzas to buy my first medicines. Fortunately, I received assistance from ALIA, an interdisciplinary association for AIDS, through which I met other people living with HIV. I realized that the constitutional principle that “health is the right of the citizen and the duty of the State” was not being respected, as did other HIV-positive people. So, we organized political marches to push the Brazilian government to purchase medicines for those infected with HIV in my home town of Londrina.

Due to my higher profile in the city and my HIV-positive status, I lost my job and many so-called friends. In public buses, nobody would sit next to me. That is when I decided to establish an NGO called REAGIR, which, together with ALIA, provides services to approximately 2,800 people.

Today, at 42, I have rebuilt my life, found new friends and won back the right to walk with my head held high. My children have been raised and educated, I have two grandchildren and a house of my own. I wake up early, drink my coffee and go out to fight. I don't suffer with the effects of the medicine, but do with the prejudice that still exists in relation to what I represent. Currently, I preside ALIA and am a member of the Municipal Health Council in Londrina. Last year, my work was recognized by the Brazilian First Lady as a national reference to women living with HIV.