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## Studio Interview: Jim Wooten Interview

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**JACKIE JUDD:** Good day I'm Jackie Judd with Kaiser Family Foundation. Several years ago the world was introduced to a young boy from South Africa named Nkosi Johnson. Nkosi was born HIV positive and when he was 11 and very, very ill from AIDS related illnesses he stood before an international audience at the AIDS conference in Durbin, South Africa and said, "Care for us and accept us. We are all human beings." A year later in 2001 he was dead. If people had forgotten about the long raging AIDS epidemic in Africa, Nkosi made them remember again. ABC news reporter Jim Wooten has written a book about Nkosi Johnson called *We Are All the Same, A Story of A Boy's Courage and A Mother's Love*. Jim, welcome.

**JIM WOOTEN:** Thank you, Jackie for inviting me.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Thank you for coming over. The first story you tell in this book is about the first time you saw him, he didn't see you, you were peering through a fence. Tell us about it.

**JIM WOOTEN:** Well it's not my habit to eavesdrop or spy on people as a reporter, but I was going to interview this young boy later in the afternoon and they were setting up cameras and lights inside this house, it's called Nkosi's Haven where AIDS mothers and their children live. He was rehearsing, in the garden, a speech that he was about to deliver in German South Africa to the International AIDS Conference. And I heard

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this very sing-song soprano as I was going in the house, when I stopped and looked and couldn't believe that it was an 11 year old boy that I was supposed to interview because he didn't strike me as more than 6 or 7 because of his size. But what he was saying was, "We are all the same." He was rehearsing it, getting the phrase down right. And what he meant by that and the theme of his speech and really, I would say the mantra of his life, was to persuade people that HIV positive people and those who are suffering from full-blown AIDS are normal people. They happen to be ill, but they're normal people. So, he sort of took a leaf from Shakespeare and Shylock and *The Merchant of Venice* speaking for marginalized people, who said, "We are all the same. If you prick us do we not bleed?" And we laugh and we love and we die, but nevertheless we're all the same, so treat us like that. That had been really, as I said, that had been the mantra of his life for several years that was what he was focused on. Treat us like we are people.

**JACKIE JUDD:** You had covered Africa, you had covered AIDS for many years. What was it you saw in Nkosi that day and in later days, that it helped you get AIDS in maybe a deeper way that you had prior?

**JIM WOOTEN:** Well, the first thing that happened was I found him so compelling and so irresistible that I abandoned the first rule of journalism which is to keep a discreet distance between you and the people that you cover. We became

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friends. We just became close pals and buddies and there was nothing I could do about it. I don't think it really influenced my reporting, maybe it did. What the hell? It did. I can't help it. The most amazing thing about him and I think the most attractive thing for me, was that despite the fact that he understood that he was in the death grip of a terminal disease, that he would not grow up to be a young man or an old man, he had become a boy of almost extraordinary good cheer. He was joyful. He was joyous. He loved laughter, he loved fun, he loved being with other children who, either HIV positive or not, he just loved being in the middle of a fun situation.

**JACKIE JUDD:** And one of the things you struggle with in the book is answering this question of how did this child, born into such dire circumstances become joyful, happy? Was it who he was born as? How much of it had to do with his birth mother, a Zulu woman who also died of AIDS? Or his adoptive mother, Gayle Johnson, who was a white woman in South Africa?

**JIM WOOTEN:** Well, I'm certainly not going to get into a discussion of nature versus nurture here with you. But I would suggest that it was a bit of both. That he had a great spirit about him, which I think was probably genetic, it was there. But what he learned from living in this family with Gayle Johnson, his white adoptive mother, was a kind of, almost a thematically ethical statement. Which was as he put it, "Do

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all you can with what you have in the time you have where you are." And that was Gayle Johnson's theme of her life. She was an AIDS activist, late coming to it, but she was still an activist. And she was a tornado. I think she filled the house with all of this love and laughter and purpose, which was very important, and he lapped it up. He ate it up. He became a crusader in his own sort-of subtle and tentative way.

**JACKIE JUDD:** You describe Gayle Johnson as being a very complicated woman.

**JIM WOOTEN:** Very Complicated.

**JACKIE JUDD:** [Laughs] And she helped create this crusade for Nkosi, how did that happen? How does he emerge as this kind of world symbol?

**JIM WOOTEN:** It's really pretty simple. He wanted to be a normal person, we are all the same you know. I'm a normal person, ergo if I'm normal I want to go to school. And amazingly enough because he was ill Gayle had never thought about sending to him school. They were sort of teaching him to read and to do mathematics at home. And he said, "No, I want to go school." So she marched him down to the neighborhood public school to enroll him and they said, "No, you can't because he has AIDS." She had been very open about it on the admissions form. Well, they didn't know what they were getting into. Neither the school nor the Johannesburg school board, nor anybody else in the country by challenging Gayle Johnson and

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her beloved little boy. She waged a really impressive and very, very, strategic and tactical fight in the media with the Johannesburg School Board and finally in the South African Parliament. And there is now, on the books of South Africa, something called Nkosi's law, which states that no child shall be denied admission into South African public schools because he or she suffers from AIDS. And as a consequence of all of this media exposure both Gayle and Nkosi became semi-celebrities, not only in Johannesburg but all over South Africa. Because the country was just then sort of coming to some sort of glimmering awareness of AIDS as a major, only in the mid 1990's. So they began to be asked both of them or separately to appear at this Lion's Club or that Kiwanis or to address this convention or something and he became quite accustomed to that. Then his presence in South Africa became a part of the international AIDS scene and he was asked to speak at the International Conference.

**JACKE JUDD:** You set his story and Gayle's story, the larger backdrop are the social and political forces that are happening in that country at that time, they're so turbulent. Nkosi actually manages to become a thorn in the side of President Mkebi, doesn't he?

**JIM WOOTEN:** He does and Mkebi was a thorn in the side of every person who was aware of AIDS and wanted to do something about it. Because President Thabo Mkebi, who was

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Nelson Mandela's successor, took then and takes now a very bizarre approach to AIDS. First of all he said there's no such virus as HIV and even if there is it doesn't cause AIDS. The whole international and local AIDS community was just apoplectic. I mean how could this be? I must say no one has ever explained this rather odd and curious position. He also said in a country that has more HIV positive and people with AIDS than any other nation on the earth, he also said, "You know, I've never met anyone with AIDS." That's what Thabo Mkebi said. Ironically less than a year after he made that public statement his Press Secretary Parksman Gallahana [misspelled?], who was a guy I knew casually, died of AIDS. And he saw him every single day. There was, in the country, because of the government a kind of reluctance to say, "Listen, folks, we really have a bad problem here. A lot of people are dying, thousands of people our dying, thousands of people are being infected every week and we have a really bad problem and we ought to address it." Nobody ever addressed it in the government because Mkebi ran the government, ran the African National Congress, which is his party and they fell right in with this, as I called it, bizarre approach. So, for instance there was a lot of pressure in the 90's put on the pharmaceuticals to make available anti-retroviral –

**JACKIE JUDD:** – More affordable.

**JIM WOOTEN:** – drugs in Africa. The more affordable,

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or even to give them away.

**JACKIE JUDD:** The access.

**JIM WOOTEN:** And the pressure was great enough that the manufacturers of AZT, one of the principal anti-retroviral drugs, offered South Africa free of charge all the AZT it wanted and President Mkebi said, "No thanks. No thanks."

**JACKIE JUDD:** But Mkebi and Nkosi end up on the same stage. There is this intersection and it happens when Nkosi speaks this line, which is the title of your book, "We are all the same." What did he say to you, the child say to you later about that experience?

**JIM WOOTEN:** Well he was very angry. What he actually said -

**JACKIE JUDD:** Because Mkebi left the stage.

**JIM WOOTEN:** Yeah, it was this huge audience in the Durbin Soccer Stadium, football stadium as they call it in the part of the world, and perhaps 15,000 or 20,000 people live and a televised of 50 or 60,000,000 people and President Mkebi delivered the keynote address. Just prior to the second keynote address which was from this pint sized kid, Nkosi Johnson. But Mkebi knew who he was and he knew who Gayle Johnson was and he had heard about them and finished his speech and he marched off the stage and he left the arena. His wife remained. Nkosi took the stage and took on Mkebi in his speech. He said, "Why can't we have Nivarapine?" A drug that

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decreases the mother to child transmission by about 30 to 50%. But Mkebi said, "No you can't have that. It's poisoning the children, it's poisoning the mothers." But he took him on in public to great cheers, great applause, standing ovation and Mkebi was nowhere to be found. Nkosi said to me later that he was quite irritated, let me put it like that. He was not a child to express anger easily because of his easy-going nature. I think he was even smiling when he said this, but, he was angry that Mkebi hadn't had the courage to stay and here what him say what needed to be said.

**JACKIE JUDD:** And a final question, several years after this remarkable child's death, what is his legacy? Not only in South Africa but in how the relationship you had with him made have changed you as a reporter?

**JIM WOOTEN:** Well, I decided, because I have to say quite honestly, I loved him as though he was though he were one of my own children and his death left a very large space in my life and in my soul. I wanted to do something that would preserve this remarkable legacy of Nkosi Johnson. His foster mother was working very hard to do that by expanding Nkosi's Havens, by raising money all the time. As I said she's a tornado and all she wants to do is provide a place for homeless AIDS mothers and their children. People who have been kicked out of their communities and their homes, and for AIDS orphans, so she is doing that. I decided that if I wrote a book that

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would tell the story of Nkosi and I'm donating most of the proceeds from this book to Nkosi's foundation, that that would help me deal with loss of Nkosi. Because it's quite a loss, I'm covered a lot of combat as you know. A lot of wars. I have seen men in uniform and men with weapons be very courageous, but there are all kinds of courage. Nkosi was the bravest person I think I ever met. Because as I said before, he knew what was happening with him, he really understood his body. He had relatively sophisticated grasp of what AIDS is and what it does and despite all of this he decided that he would, his mantra, he would do what he could do in the time he had in the place he was.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Thank you. Thank you very much for coming in today. It's a marvelous book. Jim Wooten is the author of *We Are All the Same, A Story of A Boy's Courage and A Mother's Love*. I'm Jackie Judd with the Kaiser Family Foundation, good day.

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