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THE LET YOUTH LEAD PROGRAMME

One of the unique things about Sentebale is the team’s ability to act at a fast pace to take an idea and translate it to action. That is exactly how the Let Youth Lead (LYL) advocacy programme came about. Discussions were conducted towards the end of 2016 at which point the Sentebale Botswana office was a mere couple of months old. The core programme of psychosocial support through clubs and camps targets adolescents aged 10 to 19 and the new youth programme would engage older children and broaden the scope of activities beyond HIV. The cut off age for inclusion into the LYL programme has been a subject of lengthy debates because the opportunities it provides and the impact it has is desired by all our young people. Officially, we accommodate young people up to the age of 29. However, the set up is like a family and one never fully outgrows their family. We compiled stories from a diverse group of 20 LYL advocates who entered the programme at various stages. They are moving accounts of purposeful engagement, compassion, personal growth and commitment to community service.

The youth recruitment and involvement began when I approached 2 special young women who were making waves on radio and other media outlets about their experiences of living positively with HIV - Masedi Kewamdimo and Tlotlo Moilwa who was 16 years old at the time. I initially contacted them in November 2016 with an invitation to participate in the official launch of the Sentebale country programme at the Thapong art gallery. They were guest speakers and they moved the audience when sharing their stories.

The Botswana and Lesotho teams worked intensely with the London colleagues when this programme was developed. Plans-
the launch of the LYL programme took place around February 2017 and the process was led by Ms Alice Lycett Green, the Head of Marketing and Communications and Ms Charlotte Samsone who was the Programme and Communications Officer. One of the immediate tasks was to coordinate the process of choosing the programme’s name and logo and the country teams participated fully. In her story, one of the founding advocates Tlotlo Moilwa says, “I was there when we were still trying to establish the whole idea of LYL… It was beautiful to see.” At Sentebale we don’t just pay lip service to giving our youth opportunities to participate and lead, they are genuinely involved in all aspect of the programme. The launch took place in Botswana on March 30-31st 2017 during the inaugural Youth HIV summit. For Lesotho it took place the following week and the CEO at the time, Ms Cathy Fereir attended both events.

Membership to the LYL advocacy programme is based on a simple criteria of being a young person of age 19-29 with a keen interest in youth matters, advocacy as well as the desire for personal growth and development. The programme facilitates the engagement of young people with their peers, communities, policy makers and stakeholders through various consultative forums. The main issues discussed are those that affect the youth such as their health, wellbeing, education, access to youth-friendly services etc. Those advocates who are living openly with HIV are given a platform to share their experiences and stories of hope and triumph. Central to their role is the motivation of peers who are still in denial or despair regarding their HIV status. In the current group of about 50 LYL advocates, we have several who are living openly and positively with HIV. Their stories indicate how they
have been supported to become powerful agents of change among their peers, in their communities and family settings.

Over the years, I have been involved in various youth HIV programmes and I can confidently say that the LYL advocacy programme of Sentebale ranks among the most exciting and impactful. Reading the stories and getting to appreciate the full extent of what the programme has achieved in terms of empowering these children is truly amazing and humbling. They are consistent in describing their experiences. At times we worry that they work too hard without getting enough in return, but their stories give a different picture. They all report having experienced significant personal growth and development.

Without the input and active participation of the LYL advocates in the implementation of the various Sentebale programme activities, we would not have reached some of the significant milestones we have reached such as the impact of Radio Positive which is one of the pillars of the LYL programme. This unique partnership with Duma FM was launched on World AIDS day 2018 (December 1st). The idea originated from the team in London, we were tasked to find a radio station that could launch our Radio Positive through a 4 hour live show on World AIDS day. We embraced the challenge and approached Duma FM, simply because we had identified the first 2 LYL advocates through interviews they had given on the station. We worked with Mr Donald Seberane (current Station Manager) and within a couple of weeks, Bakang Garebatho, Solomon Mokgothu, Tlotlo Moilwa, Bothe Mooketsi, Elain Lebani and Lethogonolo Matsetse delivered a magnificent show. None of them had prior experience on radio but they even managed to conduct some live interviews with members of the public. That was to become the LYL and Sentebale way of doing things; no task is daunting. The partnership with Duma FM is still ongoing more than 6 years later. In their stories, the Radio Positive presenters articulate the lasting impact it has had not only on the listeners but on their own lives as well.

Sentebale intentionally allows the young people to lead this youth programme, we listen and support the bright ideas they suggest e.g, introducing the school outreach programme, attention to mental health particularly after the COVID 19 experience and arranging life skills training. One popular activity under the LYL programme is the Youth Summit which was simultaneously launched with the programme. The advocates are fully involved in the planning of the summits which are
hosted every 2 years. They also participate as presenters and facilitators as a way of empowering them. It has been fulfilling to see the professional and personal growth amongst these young people and it is gratifying to hear them reporting and sharing it in their stories. The Botswana First Lady Mrs Neo Masisi has noticed their capabilities and whenever possible, she engages them in her initiatives as UNAIDS Champion focusing on the youth agenda. They are usually called upon to participate in key policy dialogues by The National AIDS and Health Promotion Agency (NAHPA), UNICEF and other stakeholders. Furthermore, our Senior Advocacy and Communications Officer Miss Olerato Keegope who diligently coordinates the LYL programme, together with some advocates, have been nominated to participate in key national and international forums such as; The National Children’s Council, UNICEF Youth and Children Advisory Panel, Global Fund Country Coordinating Mechanism, PEPFAR Have it All Ambassador Programme and the PMTC & STI Technical Working Group-Ministry of Health, to name a few.

All of these big achievements were made possible by the consistent financial support from the Diamonds Do Good since 2019. It is a fund that supports youth initiatives in diamond producing countries. During COVID 19 when all programme activities were suspended, with our organization financially constrained, we relied on the DDG funds and our LYL advocates to maintain social media presence and some virtual support to our beneficiaries. We are confident that the stories will be inspiring and a demonstration to DDG and potential supporters that choosing Sentebale as a partner and funding the LYL programme is worth it because it changes lives.

Ketogetswe (K.T) Montshiwa
Country Director, Sentebale Botswana
Through the Let Youth Lead advocacy programme, Sentebale facilitates the engagement of young people, their communities, and related stakeholders for advocacy efforts related to better health, education & social rights. This engagement is done through consultative forums with policy makers and related stakeholders to listen to the needs of young people and incorporate their views in health and social programming, and to influence intentional inclusion and meaningful youth engagement.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE WANT

(Extracted from Sentebale Strategy 2020-2025)

The young people we work with have articulated what good quality of life means for them. They say they want to feel valued, happy and hopeful about their futures. They want to feel self-confident and to be able to make informed choices about how to lead their lives. This means they want to:

• Feel safe and live in spaces free from any sort of violence or fear of violence
• Be included and treated as equals in all aspects of social, educational and work opportunities
• Have the necessary academic and life skills, both to be able to protect themselves and to find fulfilling ways to earn their living
• Be able to access and benefit from youth-friendly health services – including in areas of mental and physical health, substance abuse, gender-based violence and violence against children
• Be able to access youth empowerment programmes, grants, vocational and other forms of training and education
• Have the confidence and skills to stand up for themselves when they or their peers are not being treated fairly, to speak out against injustices and campaign for better access to services and treatment.

OUR ROLE: HOW WE WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

The foundation of Let Youth Lead programme has been solidified by Capacity Building, Empowerment, Mentoring and Support of LYL Advocates. The Advocates have highlighted how this foundation has contributed to their personal and professional growth which ultimately positions them for optimum participation in the programme and their communities. The reason we have been able to create impact is because we mentor them to reach their full potential; we give them the reigns, show trust, build confidence, support them to access opportunities for growth and above all, we listen to them.

Examples of capacity building include but are not limited to, leadership coaching, offering short term trainings in their
various areas of interest, assisting with skills necessary for joining the job market, providing support for mental health, organizing retreats, capacitating them to participate in policy and programming conversations at all levels. We also provide access to platforms for their participation in community, national, regional and international activities promoting the health and socio-economic wellbeing of young people.

RADIO POSITIVE
During World AIDS Day in 2018, Sentebale’s LYL Advocates hosted a 4 hour outdoor broadcast on Duma FM at Rail Park Mall. Following the engagement from the public and response from the radio station, we piloted Radio Positive from June – August 2019. It featured on The Youth Rendezvous – Duma FM’s only youth show then, and it allowed young people to discuss issues surrounding HIV as an effort to raise awareness and address stigma. All the topics were brainstormed through a series of meetings with young people and with guidance from Sentebale and related stakeholders. Radio Positive generated active engagement through texts, calls and social media. Most of the engagement led to off air support, counselling and referrals. We noticed that the show appealed to older people as well, and provided a platform for them to better understand the concerns of young people. Five years later, the show still aims to provide a platform to facilitate an open conversation about issues concerning young people with a broadened lens into their holistic health and socio-economic wellbeing.

On a weekly basis, experts from various fields are interviewed to provide professional advice and context on the topics discussed. This allows for youth and others tuning in to have the chance to call or text in and interact with professionals that they may not ordinarily have access to.

Tune in to Radio Positive on Duma Fm every Saturday from 1400-1500hrs, where hosts Bakang Garebatho and Sekgabo Seselamarumo lead discussions that provide a safe space for youth to share and demonstrate how their generation’s positive attitude and behavior will lead to a renewed focus on Health and Wellness.

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME
In 2019, one LYL Advocate recommended a school programme to address the gap in HIV information. This led to the introduction of the school outreach programme. The pilot phase reached 2000 students in 5 districts. While planning on refinement and expansion of the programme, we were unfortunately disrupted by COVID-19 resulting in minimal communication with the schools.

In 2023, the Let Youth Lead Advocates contributed to reshaping the original concept into the School Leadership Programme. This is an intervention that delivers information to children and young people so they can make informed decisions regarding
their health and wellbeing. This includes working with partner-schools to provide sexual and reproductive health and rights education, access to HIV information, HIV referral and retention on treatment programmes. It covers basic mental health and wellbeing support to children and young people through peer led interventions. This programme enables students to experience leadership opportunities, learn the art of building relationships within teams and achieving tasks effectively. It also provides an opportunity to learn to identify and display effective communication and interpersonal skills. The peer approach allows the LYL Advocates to learn more about the concerns of young people in schools, and for them to devise solutions together. This also gives the opportunity for Advocates to escalate these issues to relevant policy makers in their day to day engagements.

With this revised edition we look forward to working closely with the Ministry of Education and Skills Development to support the health, wellbeing and development of students across the country.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT
The COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted not only our programming but it also affected the mental health of the LYL advocates. Some experienced job losses, inconsistency in school, limited employment opportunities and they experienced different kinds of abuse. This resulted in evident anxiety and depression. This lead to the beginning of an intentional journey to providing mental health support the Let Youth Lead Advocates. In July 2021, we convened a 2 day mental health intervention at Manong Game Lodge. It was facilitated by a young professional therapist from the Botswana Network for Mental Health. The purpose of the retreat was to bring Let Youth Lead Advocates together in a safe, relaxed space to start a conversation on how best they would like to be supported. We used this opportunity as a platform to also cultivate their leadership skills through fun and energetic activities, where they also shared ideas on how they would like to be supported to continue doing their great work.

An assessment was done and results showed that the majority of them struggled with anxiety & depression and the pandemic exacerbated this. The young therapist who facilitated the sessions carried out a group therapy session which became the highlight of the event despite the fact that it triggered deep emotions for the majority of the advocates and staff. At the end, they gave positive feedback on the entire event and the steps to follow.

Since then, we have mainstreamed mental health support into our holistic Let Youth Lead programming offering group interventions, and one-on-one paid and unpaid sessions from a youth friendly psychologist, for those requiring them. The theme for the 3rd Youth HIV Summit in 2022 was “Mental Health Unmasked”, granting young people and stakeholders an opportunity to have honest and fruitful discussions. Prioritization of mental health forms part of the national agenda of service delivery and support for young people. We have started the work, but also know there is a lot more to be done to ensure positive mental health for the LYL Advocates and their peers.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND SUPPORT
As the fastest growing demographic, young people face multiple forms of exclusion, including barriers to education and employment, poverty and exclusion from global, regional, national and local-level decision-making processes. This ultimately cripples their ability to become resilient, self-confident, and valued members of their communities.

The Let Youth Lead advocates expressed the need to engage more on income generating activities, interventions that support their economic strengthening and their chances of staying in or applying to tertiary school. In an effort to support them, we have linked them to and facilitated workshops by fellow stakeholders such as Botswana Jobs 4 Graduates, covering topics such as: Job Readiness, CV Writing, Exploring Scholarship Opportunities and Entrepreneurship.

Fourteen Advocates have been sponsored to attend training by the Local Enterprise Authority on short courses such as sales & marketing, business planning and records keeping networking, public speaking, financial management etc. This is work in progress.

Two Let Youth Lead Advocates received seed funding from UNAIDS Botswana to operate a mobile catering business within the UN premises. We offered technical support and assisted them to register a business, open an account as well as design the logo for their company. We also organised a
A series of business trainings with Tokafala Trust, an enterprise development programme that helps entrepreneurs to develop business skills necessary to build a successful and sustainable businesses. Along with their catering business, they are on a mission to destigmatize HIV and raise awareness about living positively with HIV. They also challenge societal perceptions, promote inclusivity and spread a powerful message of acceptance and resilience. This Initiative was officially launched in June 2023 at a ceremony attended by the UNAIDS Regional Representative and heads of other UN agencies.

We are committed to ensuring that young people receive the information and skills required for them to be competitive in the job market.

PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

ADVOCATES FEEDBACK ON VARIOUS ACTIVITIES

“The mental health retreat for me was relaxing and refreshing. I especially loved the group counseling session as it allowed us a moment to speak our truths and to self introspect in a way. The therapist was also calm and led the session in a way that we were all relaxed and it became easier to talk. I also loved the game drive as it provided a gateway experience and just viewing nature was serene and relaxing for the spirit. My overall experience is that I came back refreshed and with a new outlook on life in general and having also offloaded the burdens within us and the food was divine and delicious.”

“In terms of what could be done to help my mental health, I now feel like I might need to go for more therapy to deal with my childhood and also just process things that have happened in my life. Any help in this regard would be helpful.”

“It was a very refreshing time. It got me acquainted with other young people in LYL. It helped me realize that I have come a long way and there is more room for growth. Brought to light I need to forgive and free myself.”

“I think we are young people in the midst of daily challenges, and trying to build sustainable futures for ourselves. However, we may still have high expectations from our society or families to contribute financially to the household with the little that we have earned, which unfortunately is not in the best interest of our aspirations to be independent, financially stable individuals in the long run.”
Mr Marcus ter Haar, the DDG Board Member

Diamonds Do Good started a conversation with Sentebale around 2018, 2019. I was asked to look for really deserving causes we could support in diamond producing countries and in Botswana Sentebale bubbled to the top. They have been very active since their inception in Botswana in 2016 and we came in at the time when the Let Youth Lead programme was just coming into fruition. The Let Youth Lead programme is powerful in that its taking the voices of people who have been affected and impacted by HIV and letting them tell their own stories.

I think that the relationship has grown with the continued generous support from DDG, they have been able to grow and splinter their programmes into different innovative areas. One of the projects for example is the Radio Positive concept. They reach a much wider audience who want to hear about the impact of HIV and also the ancillary issues that come with dealing with HIV through Duma FM which offers a massive footprint.

Our partnership with Sentebale started at a time when their growth was just burgeoning. These young children, these people with passion and energy are now advocates and they are informing policy makers, government agencies and international organisations through a voice which they never had before. That’s the impact and where DDG really makes a difference.

What the kids at Sentebale are doing is something bigger, they are now thriving; thriving living alongside HIV, they are able to support their peers and one another. They have taken their work so seriously that they are now leading the conversation, they own the narrative and that’s something I hadn’t really anticipated. All I saw was confidence, ownership, positivity, and these are people who are dealing with matters that I think a lot of us maybe can’t comprehend. Its really, really inspirational.

(June, 2023)
One of the great privileges of my life has been the opportunity to get to know some of the incredible Sentebale youth advocates with the Let Youth Lead programme. I have been in awe of their strength, courage and determination as I have watched from the sidelines as they have spoken bravely, confidently and articulately at global round tables and on huge stages as they addressed royalty, politicians and policy makers, holding their own as they shared their stories and advocated for themselves and other young people with HIV.

Four brilliant Sentebale advocates from Botswana and Lesotho shone brightly, along with many other inspirational young advocates from around the world, at the International AIDS conference in Amsterdam in 2018 and powerfully educated leaders in the field on what it meant to be a young person with HIV and where their needs were not being met. One very simple example that always stuck with me was an advocate sharing that one of the reasons children and adolescents sometimes didn’t want to collect their medication from dispensaries was that the pills jangled in their backpacks, bringing unwanted questions and attention from other children. When I mentioned this afterwards to a representative from a drug company whom I encountered, he was rather shocked to hear this as it was not something that had occurred to them. He said that the solution was as simple as putting the drugs into blister packs, but they hadn’t known to do so. This simple example highlights the invaluable input that can be given by those young people who are actually living the challenges of medical adherence and trying to live a life as close to normal as possible.

Even more powerful than the concert stages and the round tables attended by royalty is the tireless work these advocates do back home, in Botswana and Lesotho. In the face of enduring stigma and often at great personal cost, they have worked relentlessly to share their stories and educate other young people and the greater population that individuals with HIV need not be defined by their diagnosis. Through radio broadcasts, social media posts and in-person events and interactions, they courageously break down the stigma and show that HIV is not an impediment to living full, healthy, meaningful lives. They share the facts in a way that is relevant to the younger generation as no one else can.

Over the past seven years I have witnessed phenomenal courage and determination in advocates such as Tlotlo, Sekgabo, Solomon (Botswana) and Molise and Rethabile from Lesotho. It is the greatest honour to know them and continue to watch them blaze a brighter path forward for all young people with living HIV.
BAKANG GAREBATHO (29)
Hello, I’m Bakang Itumeleng Garebatho, a proud member of Let Youth Lead (LYL) Programme and an LYL advocate at Sentebale. I stepped into the LYL family in November 2017, and as I celebrate my sixth year in this transformative space, I can’t help but reflect on the incredible journey I’ve had.

I found my way to LYL out of a deep need to be surrounded by individuals who understand the challenges I face, especially as a young person living with HIV. My journey took an unexpected turn as I became not just an advocate but an HIV activist, sharing my experiences with the wider youth community and working tirelessly to destigmatize HIV in our society.

Being part of the LYL programme has been an amazing journey for me. I’ve had the privilege of meeting incredible individuals like Tlotlo and Sekgabo, and I’ve expanded my horizons by learning more about HIV and growing as a person and an activist. The programme has become a platform for me to build a career, shape my personal brand, and champion advocacy agendas focused on the well-being of those living with HIV. Additionally, it has provided me with the opportunity to explore my own identity, refine my ideas, and extend a helping hand to young people facing various challenges.

The impact of LYL on my life extends into different aspects—transforming my experiences at home, school, and within my community. Growing up in a highly HIV stigmatized era, I wasn’t vocal about my challenges, but LYL empowered me to be authentic and unapologetic about who I am. Becoming an HIV activist was a conscious decision to ensure that the stories of those living with HIV end positively, offering hope to the younger generation and fostering acceptance in the community.

Three moments stand out in my journey as a Let Youth Lead Advocate. Firstly, when I came up with the school outreach programme aimed at addressing HIV issues among students and creating a better environment, especially for those living with HIV. Secondly, the realization of my impact on adolescents and young people who saw hope and a better vision for their lives through my story living with HIV. Lastly, representing Botswana at Spark 19 training in Lesotho back in 2019, where I recognized my worth not just as a Sentebale advocate but as a representative of my country and its mission.

My involvement in various activities has been both educational and entertaining. Among them, the Mental Health retreat in 2022 stands out as a profound experience. Focused on mental well-being, it not only provided insights into my own mental health but also equipped me with strategies for self-care. This knowledge has been instrumental in my advocacy, enabling me to guide young people on managing and transforming their mental health positively.

To my fellow young people in Botswana, I share a simple yet powerful message: take control of your lives, be the captains of your destinies, and hold the pen that writes the story of your lives.

Additionally, I actively participate in Youth Summits, where we gather to pause, reflect, and strategize on our advocacy efforts. These summits serve as crucial moments for measuring progress and introspecting, especially as HIV activists. Furthermore, I’ve had the opportunity to engage with the podcast, where fellow
activists share their stories. This exposure not only allows me to appreciate the work of other advocates but also provides valuable lessons on how to navigate various challenges. A crucial lesson I’ve learned from Let Youth Lead is that our surroundings speak volumes about who we are. Positive environments breed positive lives, and the people around us play a pivotal role in shaping our motivation and inspiration.

The Let Youth Lead programme stands as a beacon of transformative change, offering diverse services, notably psychosocial support, to young individuals navigating the complexities of living with HIV. This initiative serves as a life-changing force, empowering individuals to break free from the confines of their shells. Whether positioned as trailblazers or as beneficiaries of the programme’s services, Let Youth Lead provides an indispensable space for growth and development.
Hello, I’m Botlhe Jane Kgosimore, and my LYL adventure kicked off in March 2017. You can usually catch me on Duma FM, Botswana’s biggest private radio station. But how did I get here? Well, Sentebale teamed up with Duma FM in 2017, and that’s where my journey began.

I hosted a show called the Youth Rendezvous every Saturday, and that’s where the magic started. Sentebale teamed up with Duma FM in 2017, and that’s where my journey began.

I hosted a show called the Youth Rendezvous every Saturday, and that’s where the magic started. Sentebale’s Country Director, Mme KT Montshiwa, and I had a series of interviews. We dove deep into psychosocial support for young people living with HIV and having young people living with HIV share their stories. Those interviews sparked something in me. I wanted to raise awareness and break the myths about HIV. I wanted to encourage those in denial to stick to their treatment and work together for an HIV-free nation.

One thing led to another, and I found myself moderating the inaugural youth HIV summit in March 2017. Picture this – a massive space, buzzing with different stakeholders and young people. As I took the role of a moderator, we delved into youth experiences living with HIV, discussing their perspectives as both advocates and service recipients. The panel discussion was nothing short of lovely. What an experience! It was then that I knew I wanted to be part of a group of change-makers, leaders of today, fighting for better policies against HIV. And that’s how I joined the Let Youth Lead programme.

Some of my experiences will definitely be the highlight of the inaugural youth HIV Summit. And some of the experiences will also involve interacting with different organizations that ended up reaching out because of these conversations we had on radio. We’ve had the Botswana Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (BONEPWA) among so many other organizations that are raising awareness towards the fight against HIV. That is, among some of the experiences, some of my many memories.

Let me tell you how Let Youth Lead (LYL) changed my life. It brought so much humility. You see, it opened my eyes to different stories, different lives. I started being thankful for even the smallest things, things I never thought much about before Sentebale came into my life. When you hear young people sharing their stories—how they grew up, how they found out about their HIV status—you realize that your problems aren’t as big as you thought. LYL filled me with gratitude for the little things, and it taught me to appreciate others more. Whether I know them well or just met them, everyone has a story, and you only truly understand it when you sit down and listen. It’s about being thankful for others, no matter what.
one, it’s all about connecting with young people. Every Saturday, I eagerly awaited the chance to interact with them on my radio show. Our Country Director, Ms KT Montshiwa, would bring young people from all over Botswana to share their stories. It was incredible to see their zest for life. They would motivate others, emphasizing that HIV isn’t a life-ender. It’s just a virus, and by taking your treatment, you can lead a normal life. Hearing young people call in, thanking us, especially when they just discovered their HIV status, was heartwarming. They felt encouraged and more hopeful about life, and those moments are etched in my memory forever.

Highlight number two, definitely meeting Prince Harry during his official visit on the 26th of September 2019 in Kasane! That was beautiful! He got to chat with me a little bit just to appreciate Duma FM and the work that we have been doing with Sentebale, the impact that it has had on the LYL programme, appreciating the listenership, the impact on the listeners and the coverage that Duma FM has. So that is definitely a highlight for the books.

Another standout moment facilitated by Sentebale was my involvement as a youth panelist in August 2019 with “The Champions for an AIDS Free Generation in Africa.” Chaired by former President Festus Mogae, this group of eminent figures aimed to advance the cause. Meeting heads of state and discussing their impactful work was a privilege. As a radio presenter, I contributed to the panel’s discussion on the crucial role of media in the HIV fight. We explored topics like maximizing media for reaching young people and addressing challenges in accessing youth-friendly health services. Additionally, my association with Sentebale led to collaboration with the National AIDS and Health Promotion Agency (NAHPA). This connection provided an opportunity to contribute to youth meaningful engagements, shaping the strategic framework of the First Lady of Botswana, Mrs. Neo Jane Masisi. These experiences have significantly broadened my perspective and allowed me to play a meaningful role in the HIV response.

I’ve loved every activity, especially interacting with young people. Whether it’s the school outreach programmes or our radio interactions, it’s been a blast. My advice to young people is to be humble and grateful. You never know someone’s story until you sit down and listen. Through mindset change, we can beat this fight against HIV together.

Taking care of yourself and loving one another is a simple principle I’ve learned. And to stakeholders, know that LYL is here to stay. We’re not just participants; we’re advocates working towards an HIV-free Botswana by 2030.
In LYL I have been involved in the podcast that we did and I had participated in Radio Positive when it was in its early stages. I have been involved in the school outreach activities and I have also taken part in moderating discussions during our HIV Youth Summits. I have been part of LYL since 2018. I believe the main reason I joined LYL was because I wanted to volunteer and to use my time to serve my community. It is through this opportunity that I was also able to get an understanding of work around HIV and the community work that goes around what we do at LYL. I mostly also joined because I believe it is important that as young people we are involved in making decisions and leading the narrative on issues that affect us as young people. I saw this as an opportunity for me to raise my voice, to also empower other young people to raise their voices to create change in their communities.

The LYL programme has given me great opportunities to grow as an individual, to learn, to experience, and also cultivate some of the skills that I didn’t have when I started. I have been able to moderate panel discussions. I have been able to lead and even MC some of the discussions we have had. It is through this programme that I have been able to attend conferences like the AIDS 2020 conference, even though I did attend it virtually, I was able to learn from the experience and interact with other people in the HIV space across the world. I also got to learn from other people and peers working in the space to understand the groundbreaking research that is ongoing in terms of HIV, and understand how other countries are doing things.

I got to understand how us as young people can create the change we desire to see. I had an opportunity to go for the radio masterclass training when we first started Radio Positive. I was able to learn what it takes to be a radio presenter and what you need to look out for when you are presenting on radio. Besides that, I have also been able to grow as an individual. I have been able to voice out my concerns in terms of youth issues, and take part in creating change in my community. I believe I have been able to grow as a leader in my community and beyond, because of this programme. I was given the opportunity to learn, and be a better individual, and to learn what it takes to become the leader I desire to be.

It is through this programme that I have also been able to build relationships with other LYL advocates. I’ve gotten to meet a diverse set of people and interact with people I wouldn’t usually get to interact with. My main reason for joining was also just to grow as an individual, especially in terms of public speaking and understanding of leadership and I believe that through this programme I have been able to do just that. I have seen many experiences where I am able to even surpass my own expectations of myself.

When I joined this programme I was still shy and hadn’t had any opportunities to find my voice and find exactly what I wanted to do. But within a year of joining this programme I understood that I love working with the community. I actually loved interacting with other young people and getting their view of the world we live in and understanding how I can better the situations that they are in. It is also through this programme that I believe I have grown so much. I now understand the career path that I would like to take. I now understand which issues I’m passionate about and I am still with LYL because it is exactly aligned with the issues I want to address, which is mainly in community development and the HIV space.

I think one of my most memorable moments would be the very first Youth HIV Summit. I had to make a presentation and a few people encouraged me- so I went for it. I know that a clip of the Summit was on national television and a lot of people called me and told me they saw me on TV. But besides that, it was just a moment where I understood that I could do that. I could be someone who speaks out. I could be someone who has a voice. I could be someone who makes use of opportunities. It was quite a learning moment for me and I think it is the moment I realized that volunteering is something that I want to do.

My second most memorable moment is the ICASA conference which was in Durban in 2021. I got the chance to go there and represent the LYL Advocates. Besides the fact that the whole trip was fully sponsored, getting to go on a plane and being able to converse with other LYL advocates from Lesotho was a great experience.

It was quite a learning moment because I got to understand what goes on in the HIV advocacy space. I got to learn what other countries are doing and I got to see other young people take charge, do presentations, and lead. You get to see that there...
really is space for young people to voice out their concerns, and there is space for young people to create change. We just have to take up those spaces and opportunities when they present themselves.

Another memorable moment was definitely the mental health retreat we had in Manong in July 2021. We got to speak to a mental health professional. And you know, a lot of us were divulging things that were very personal to us. But we knew that we were in a safe space where we could cry, we could comfort each other, and where we knew that no one was judging us. That was quite a big, memorable moment for me. It made me see that even amongst ourselves, there is a real need for us to take charge of our mental health. I might see someone who is all jolly and happy but they are going through a lot. So it is up to me as another advocate and friend to ask “how are you feeling today?” Such a small thing can really help someone in the long run. Because sometimes we are thinking we are just here to grow professionally, but also it is important to see that personally we can see changes in you. We can see you become a better person. We can see you take charge of your future. We can see you deal with your past so that your future can be great.

I definitely enjoyed the few episodes of Radio Positive that I was in and I would definitely like to try it again. The podcast was also great for me. I was so nervous. But going through it and seeing the end product- you know sometimes you’re thinking you are definitely embarrassing yourself, but then you see the end product and you’re like “oh my goodness, perfection!” So sometimes it’s great to put ourselves out there and really just see ourselves become better individuals. I think for me, I have always enjoyed the opportunity that being a LYL advocate affords me. The fact that I can learn new things about myself. There are people that believe in me who will say, “I know you can do this. I know you haven’t done it, but you can do this.” I am really grateful to Olerato because she always pushes me to get out of my shell and discover the hidden gems I have within myself. That’s another big thing- you know, how encouraging it is that there’s someone there that is willing to offer you a helping hand throughout your journey as a LYL advocate, and that’s willing to support you through whatever so that you can be a better LYL advocate. That is Olerato.

I can definitely attest to the fact that being a volunteer affords you so many opportunities. It gives you experience which you are going to use when applying for scholarships, fellowships and conferences. Volunteer your time, volunteer your energy. Actually put so much enthusiasm into it. Don’t expect someone to follow you. Actually put in the work, and I am definitely sure of this- you will reap the rewards. I have had so many opportunities because of volunteering. It even helped me get into the YALI programme in South Africa.

Advice? For me it would definitely be, take a moment out of your life and actually volunteer your time to create a better society and better community. Volunteering is not just about you offering help to a company or an organisation for free. It’s also about your personal growth.

For me the key lesson I’ve learnt from LYL would definitely be that young people can do so much more if they actually see that they can, and have the opportunity to do just that. I will definitely say that when the LYL programme started, there wasn’t a lot that we knew. We just knew that we wanted to volunteer. We just knew that we wanted to work in the HIV/AIDS space. But beyond that, we didn’t have a clear picture of what we wanted. Today we have so many things within LYL that came from the minds of young people and because young people said we want to do this because we believe it can bring change. We’ve now had 3 HIV Youth Summits hosted by young people. We took charge of the work. We were willing to work and produce the results that we have right now. I think the main lesson that I learnt is that nothing can be done for the youth without young people, and I’ve definitely seen that through LYL.

I can definitely attest to the fact that being a volunteer affords you so many opportunities. It gives you experience which you are going to use when applying for scholarships, fellowships and conferences. Volunteer your time, volunteer your energy. Actually put so much enthusiasm into it. Don’t expect someone to follow you. Actually put in the work, and I am definitely sure of this- you will reap the rewards. I have had so many opportunities because of volunteering. It even helped me get into the YALI programme in South Africa.

I BELIEVE I HAVE BEEN ABLE TO GROW AS A LEADER IN MY COMMUNITY AND BEYOND
ELAIN LEBANI (23)

As a member of LYL, I have been part of the school outreach programme, and part of the podcast. I’ve been in LYL for 7 years now and I joined LYL because I enjoy serving and find fulfillment and meaning in it. I aspired to be a change agent and I didn’t just want to be a change agent, but I wanted to be able to implement strategies and plans to improve the lives of others.

How has it impacted my life? I have learnt a lot throughout my journey. But my favorite has to be discovering that I am a great facilitator and I work well with young people and kids. Being part of LYL has been such a great learning experience. It has encouraged me to be informed and knowledgeable. I have grown as an individual and I will forever be grateful. Also, LYL has given me a chance to increase my network.

One of my favourite activities was the Sip and Paint activity. Man, I always knew I am creative and I love planning and organizing things. But I thought art was never my passion, hence why I never even tried doing anything artistic. The session was a good way of trying something new and out of my comfort zone. Another activity was our trip to Big Valley Game Lodge. It was a reminder of what it means to meaningfully engage as a youth advocate. Sometimes, we get so comfortable with the advocacy work and we forget certain things or simply forget why we are doing it in the first place. So this was a great reminder and experience. Also the adrenaline rush from the quad bikes was top tier! The mental health retreat in Manong Game Lodge was another great moment. It was the wake up call that I needed, so I can start to heal and overcome my traumas, in order to be a better individual.

Through LYL I grew as an individual. I have learnt to be able to articulate myself very well. It used to be a challenge because personally, I fumble when it comes to expressing myself and articulating my points. But with the podcast and the school outreach activities, I was able to say the most important things that needed to be said, the things that mattered.

My gentle reminder to everyone is that it is okay to be vulnerable. I encourage you to take time off from your busy schedule to reflect, refresh and restart because the world won’t stop to give you time off- you need to do that for yourself. Also, opportunities don’t come straight to your door. You need to go out and find them. As young people, we need to start creating opportunities for ourselves, they won’t come straight to your door. We need to make the first move.

My key lessons that I’ve learnt from Sentebale is that if you are not ready to grow as an individual, no one can force you. So if you want to see the change that you speak of, it must start within. But if you are not ready, you will stay in that same place.

To policymakers and stakeholders.

What I would like you to know about LYL is that we are changemakers. We develop the country and we implement the strategies that we are talking about. We want to see change and we are very passionate about what we do.
GOULD BARATEDI (27)

I have been part of the LYL programme since 2020, it’s been four years now I believe. What led me to join LYL is my passion for social justice. I am about addressing social inequalities and injustices, focusing this on human rights, equality and inclusion of key populations. I joined because of my desire to make a positive change in my community, and LYL gave me the platform to actively contribute a positive change in my community and be able to create tangible improvements in addressing pressing issues. It has been my powerful motivator.

I believe in the power of youth voices. I believe that young people have unique perspectives and energy that can lead to meaningful and transformative change. I joined LYL due to its commitment to community engagements. We engage directly with communities to understand their needs and work collaboratively on solutions, and be able to actively participate in community-driven initiatives and projects. LYL gives us a chance to develop our skills including communication, leadership and organisational skills. Through LYL we are able to enhance our personal and professional development. It also gives us a chance to enhance our networking skills and connect with people who share similar values and goals.

My experience in the LYL programme has been very rewarding and transformative. For example, with community engagement, we have been involved in community based projects including conducting awareness campaigns and collaborating with other local organizations to campaign for change and raise awareness to influence decision makers. I have learnt a lot from that. It has been rewarding in terms of networking and building my collaborative skills. LYL has given me the platform to meet and collaborate with experts and other activists in the field.

It has been a great satisfaction seeing tangible positive changes in my community because of the LYL advocacy work. LYL has helped me navigate the complexities of advocacy work and this has increased my self-awareness, resilience and given me a deeper understanding of social issues.

Through my advocacy I have been able to contribute towards positive change and more inclusivity especially for people in the LGBTQI+ community. It has been a great journey because at the end, we serve our communities and we make sure that they are included and motivated to participate in their civic duties.

Being a LYL advocate, with all this personal growth and development, has enabled me to advocate for inclusion especially for the LGBTQI+ community in the workplace. I encourage my department at work to adopt inclusive policies and practices and foster a diverse and welcoming workplace culture.

My most memorable moment is the retreat that happened in Kumakwane where we were trying to establish a plan for the year 2022. It gave us the platform to contribute to how we want the year to be. The second one was the summit in Palapye, where we met with different activists from around the country and we met with so many professionals in the HIV/AIDS space. The third memorable moment was when we went to Artesia for the leadership programme, where we were teaching students about SRH and financial literacy. I’ve enjoyed the leadership programme with Artesia students because it was a great activity. We were not just imparting the knowledge to the students, but we were also learning about ourselves. The kids have also built a sense of empowerment. Actively participating in advocacy work empowers an individual, as it gives you a sense of agency and the belief that your actions can lead to positive change. Being part of the LYL lead to transformation.

“IN LYL, WE WORK TOGETHER AS A FAMILY”
there were very welcoming, warm and eager to learn, and they are always happy to see us and we are always happy to see them. They are very brilliant students and very eager to learn a lot about topics that affect them.

The advice I can share with young people in Botswana is that you should explore your passion. Take time to discover your interest and passion, whether it’s in art, science or community service. Find what it is that you love, that can lead to a more fulfilling life. Invest in your education because it is a powerful tool that can open the door to various opportunities. Drive for academic excellence and consider pursuing further education or any other skills training. You should be resilient in this life, because this life is full of challenges. With resilience someone has the ability to bounce back from any setback, learn from failures and use them as a stepping stone to success. You should embrace your diversity and your uniqueness. Do this while respecting other people’s unique diversity and other people’s perspective, and by engaging in conversations that promote understanding and unity, and even more inclusion and tolerance.

I would advise that young people should volunteer and give back because it can be incredibly rewarding. It does not only help others but it allows them to also develop. They should be able to set and define their goals because this will give them a sense of direction and motivation. You should network and connect, which is very crucial for careers. Because building

a strong network can open up a door to opportunities, and make it a point to attend community events. Be informed and be aware of local and global issues as this knowledge can contribute positively to your community and the world. The most crucial one is that you should take care of your well being physically, mentally and socially. Practice self care and seek support when needed. Learn financial literacy because it tends to be one of the most important aspects of our lives, as it contributes to our stability. You should be active participants in your community, understand your rights and carry out your civic duties.

In LYL, we work together as a family. We give each other the platform to express ourselves without any type of judgment or discrimination, no matter where you are coming from or what you look like. We have a very welcoming environment. With LYL, we are a family that makes sure everyone is included and can contribute towards making a change in their community.
I have been in LYL for 3 years now, mainly as a part of the school outreach programme. I joined LYL because I wanted to belong to a group of youth who had the same vision as me, in terms of issues related to HIV. Apart from having a sense of belonging, the programme has given me a very strong family with whom to share different life experiences and common goals. I also get to meet different stakeholders around the country and get to see how we can help young people at school and home, who are battling issues surrounding HIV/AIDS. I love getting to do all this through school outreach programmes and workshops around the country.

With me, life hasn’t been that difficult. But having people with whom I share the same sentiments has made it much better. I remember one time, I was one of the panelists, having to speak for young people. It was a life changing experience which I think brought so many changes and made me see that I can make decisions and speak for others.

I’ve had some memorable moments being part of LYL. One moment was being part of the Adolescent and Young People Forum retreat where different stakeholders such as BONELA, Silence Kills, Tebelopele, UNICEF and others met to welcome the newly formed committee members. We also got the chance to meet and connect with other young people from around the country, see how they are doing and discuss the issues affecting them. I got the chance to present about LYL and what we do, and talk about Sentebale as a whole. Another great moment was the ESA Commitment workshop that was held in 2022. We talked about the road to fulfilling the needs of adolescents and young people in Botswana, in terms of education, health and their wellbeing. We further discussed the unfinished business in the past year of the commitment, which hindered the provision of quality delivery of youth friendly health services, provision of well trained CSE personnel and the curriculum itself for young people in schools.

Lastly, the LYL retreat was another great experience for me. We sat down and reflected on what we have achieved so far, and brainstormed where we want to see the programme go. It was really an amazing weekend and the group discussions were top notch. This year I want to try to attend more workshops because they are a great experience for me.

I feel that young people should not shy away from getting educated about their sexual and reproductive health and rights. There is nothing wrong with going to the hospital/clinic and getting free condoms as long as we are all protected and protecting our loved ones. The aim is to have less new HIV/AIDS infection rates and teenage pregnancies. Let us be responsible for our health because if we don’t, no one will.

Few people used to openly talk about HIV/AIDS, especially amongst the youth. However through the LYL programme, people are eager to learn more and they are always tuning in to the radio programme. I feel the radio show is an eye opener for most people and those affected can live healthy positive lives.

“LYL HAS TAUGHT ME SO MUCH ABOUT FIGHTING STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION”
Hey, my name is Jennifer Olerato Bakwali, a 21-year-old advocate proudly associated with Let Youth Lead (LYL) under Sentebale. The day I stepped into the world of LYL was during the third youth summit in Palapye back in 2022. This two-day summit wasn’t just a gathering; it was an invitation for me to represent as a leader from Palapye Teens Club. Little did I know that this encounter would unleash a profound transformation in my life, particularly as someone living with HIV.

Choosing to join LYL was more than just a decision; it was a commitment to breaking barriers and showcasing the strength and positivity that can exist in someone living with HIV like me. The advocacy work, the leadership opportunities, and the chance to be a role model for others like me resonated deeply within me. I was interested in the potential for personal growth, learning, and the chance to become a leader and inspiration for others like me.

My journey with LYL has been a remarkable adventure, taking me to places, exposing me to many opportunities, and allowing me to represent adolescent girls and young women on national agendas like the Adolescents and Young People (AYP) Forum where I was also successfully voted into the AYP Forum Committee early 2023 to continue growing and expanding my leadership skills. Being part of the AYP Forum Committee I actively contribute to the HIV and SRHR responses in the country. LYL has not only transformed me personally but has made me a confident person who can express herself, both at home and in the community.

The LYL Programme has been a guiding force, not just in my personal life, but in my home and community. It has enabled me to open up, talk freely about my work at Sentebale, and become a beacon of inspiration for other young people living with HIV. Through safe spaces provided by LYL, I’ve gained the courage and confidence to voice out and initiate conversations both at home and in the community. It has given me a platform to be an advocate for other young people living with HIV, recruiting members for the Palapye Teen Club and making a positive impact in my community.

Among the countless memorable moments with Sentebale, the third Youth Summit at Cresta Botsalo in Palapye stands out. The yoga session just outside Gaborone, facilitated by a psychologist, was not just a physical activity but a therapeutic experience. Another cherished memory was the meeting at Adansonia Hotel in Francistown with the online Network of Young People Living with HIV support group members, where we discussed our challenges and future plans to launch this network in Botswana to be an in-person one. The first of its kind. We had representatives from UNICEF Botswana and NAHPA present, Ruben and Ms Sheila to hear from us directly.

One of the activities I enjoyed the most was the yoga session, which included group therapy. It not only promoted physical well-being but also provided emotional support and a sense of camaraderie among advocates.

My advice to young people is simple yet profound – trust in yourself, believe in your abilities, and approach everything with passion. Fight self-stigma, break free from limitations, and live life to the fullest. I’ve learned through this journey that as an individual, you must be your own mentor and inspiration. It starts with you and can impact others positively.

In Setswana, we say, “Kgetsi ya tsie e kgonwa ke go tshwaraganelwa” – together we can achieve more. As LYL Advocates, we may not be perfect, but we strive to make a positive impact through various programmes. We strive to create a positive impact, especially for those living with HIV. Engage with us, involve us, and let us be part of the decision-making process that directly affects our lives. That’s the plea from LYL Advocates like me.
My name is Masedi, but I prefer Joy, and I am an LYL advocate who has been part of LYL since 2019. Honestly at first I joined because I wanted to be part of the youth camp staff, but I continued to stay despite the suspension of camps due to Covid-19. I fell in love with the work that we do.

My experience in LYL has been both good and bad. It’s been good because I get to attend certain workshops and some conferences which give me great skills and knowledge. Sometimes it is bad because not all the conferences and workshops are age friendly. There are a lot of age restrictions, where only people up to a certain age are allowed to attend. This hurts a lot as those conferences are the ones I could learn different things from.

I really enjoyed the outing to Big Valley Game Lodge. I have a fear of heights and yet I went ziplining. I was even the first one to do it in the group. I was panicking a lot, but I did it first so others can do it and not be afraid. Another time, I participated in the school outreach programme. I fell in love with it. Getting to know how students in schools in rural areas are coping, and getting to find ways to help them was great. I actually wanted to go back again. In 2019, I got to be part of the Johnson and Johnson conference on injectable ARVs. I had been a member of LYL for just one day and I was already sent out on an assignment. I went there and killed it! Even though there were people older than me in my group, I was the group leader and I had to give a presentation. I have a fear of audiences but I nailed that presentation. In 2022 I attended the Sentebale Youth Summit in Palapye. It was my second summit and it was different for me this time around, as I had now warmed up and felt like I was part of the LYL family. I was now a partaker. I was hands on. I was able to ask questions without being shy.

I would like to let other young people in Botswana know that they should never feel alone. If they are going through situations and challenges they should get in touch with us. Even though we may not have the money, we can work things out with them. Suicide is not an option. Also that they should have an intimate relationship with God. Let God be the centre of their lives. God has amazing plans regarding each and everyone of us. They should also believe in themselves and love themselves first. They should prioritise themselves.

One key lesson I’ve learnt is, if we don’t talk about it, then we can not expect it to be heard and solved. Your vote is your voice.
“LYL HELPED ME TO BLOSSOM AND I AM MORE VERSATILE”

KATLEGO MOLETE (31)

I started with Sentebale in June 2019. Back then I started assisting managing our local Facebook page, Sentebale BW. It has been awesome! Oh my gosh, I love every bit of it. Okay let me tell you how I started. I always knew as a kid that I needed to volunteer and give back to the community, even from when I was around 13,14 years old. But I didn’t know where exactly to go, if you get my drift. My purpose was not really defined, so I didn’t know what it was exactly that I wanted, up until I was older. Then in 2019 I had just quit my job and I was like, I need to be intentional about things that I want, and go for things that I want. That’s when I started searching for an NGO to join to give back to the community. Randomly scrolling on Instagram I just bumped into a Sentebale post on their international page. I said “wow these guys do some work in Botswana and I don’t even know about it. But the work they do is exactly what I want to do.” So I went into their page and started digging. Went onto their website and got their email. I emailed them and got no response. I DM’d them on Instagram. No response. So I looked and looked and searched until I saw that there is this lovely lady called Sekgabo who is from Botswana and is a volunteer! I said, “right, let me search for Sekgabo.” I looked for her on Instagram and DM’d her. She’s the one who helped me out. She said I should contact this number and ask for Olerato at the office, and Olerato will assist me. I contacted Olerato and wow, she is an amazing person. She invited me to the office for a meeting. She just wanted to check if I am aligned with their mission and vision. From that meeting I knew that this is home, this is what I have always wanted. I just never knew about you guys. You’re so hidden and I just found you on Instagram! So yeah, I joined and then literally the next day I started with school outreach activities. Olerato just said “come and check it out, maybe you’ll love it, you’re right on time.” So that’s how I started. Then I started working in the social media department. I have been in LYL since then and it’s been lovely, it’s been awesome!

I’ve had an amazing experience with my fellow advocates, and we have done some work with school outreaches and all the other programmes. I’ve managed to gain confidence to share information freely in a fun and lively manner to the young ones and people my age. Even to people I work with and at home. So it has been really great. I also learnt to create that platform, that free environment where people can express themselves freely and ask for advice. At first I actually didn’t know how to share information. I was always so shy. So now I’m free and I am able to make other people feel free as well.

One of my most memorable events, I would have to say it was my second day as a LYL advocate. The very first team I met was very welcoming and loving and it was so fun. I got to learn what advocacy was all about when we went to Rasesa for a school outreach activity. We talked to the kids, we used edutainment as a form of delivering the information and the kids were very receptive. They were so fun as well. It was awesome.

Another event was the time we went for a wellness day out of the city. We did some yoga and we had a psychologist talk to us as a group, and wow, it was amazing. She said something about distinguishing your friends and acquaintances- that my friend, is the day I discovered that I don’t have friends. I call strangers friends apparently. So I learnt a lot. But it was a great lesson learnt. It was a very relaxing day and I learnt a lot about myself. The third most memorable event was definitely the Youth Summit in 2019. We had a wonderful time. I got to meet every advocate there was in Gaborone. There were a bunch of young people there. I was so jolly, it was our time! I remember Olerato throwing me on stage to talk about my experience and all I could say was “wow, wow, wow.” I had a ball. It was the most memorable day.

My advice to young people in Botswana is to know yourself. Know who you are and what you stand for, and all about you. Your interest, your likes, your purpose. You’ve got to know where you stand so that you can be easily identified. Not just knowing who you are, but also to be easily identified by people who are willing to give you opportunities.

A key lesson that I’ve learnt from LYL is to always be ready. Always be ready to represent yourself, or represent others. Readiness is very important because you never know who you might meet when you step out your door, or step inside a door. Sentebale has given me a platform to stand before people and I had to be ready for that. So that is one lesson that I’ve learnt.
Hello, I’m Lucy Moyo, a 26-year-old Let Youth Lead (LYL) Advocate, and I’ve been part of this empowering group for three impactful years. My journey with LYL began in 2020, introduced by a fellow advocate just after the national lockdown. I was immediately drawn to the programme, sensing a passion and purpose in advocating for the rights of young people.

Being part of LYL has been a blend of fun and education, leaving a profound impact on my life both academically and within my community. It has instilled assertiveness and confidence, especially in addressing the challenges faced by individuals living with HIV. LYL has not only taught me acceptance as a young person living openly with HIV but has also provided a robust support system, fostering personal growth.

One of the most memorable experiences I’ve had with LYL was during a school outreach programme in Artesia at a school called Artesia Junior Secondary School. Engaging with young students, discussing their challenges, and imparting knowledge on sexual safety and navigating the complexities of youth was a transformative moment. Another impactful experience was a group therapy session during a retreat with fellow LYL advocates, challenging my preconceptions about the effectiveness of such sessions. Lastly, a financial literacy session on goal setting proved invaluable, aiding me in crafting and executing a business plan.

Among the activities I enjoyed the most were yoga sessions and group work during retreats. The physical exercise and mental rejuvenation through group activities were not only fun but also highlighted the intelligence and creativity of the diverse group of young people within LYL.

LYL has taught me the invaluable lesson that it’s okay to be different, to embrace one’s uniqueness while still contributing, learning, and showing kindness. Engaging with people of diverse backgrounds has broadened my perspective, fostering kindness and authenticity.

My advice to fellow young people is simple - if you really want it, go get it! Whether it’s starting a business, joining an NGO, or trying something new, embrace change and pursue your passions without hesitation. Time waits for no one.

ENGAGING WITH PEOPLE OF DIVERSE BACKGROUND HAS BROADENED MY PERSPECTIVE, FOSTERING KINDNESS AND AUTHENTICITY

“BEING PART OF LYL HAS BEEN A BLEND OF FUN AND EDUCATION, LEAVING A PROFOUND IMPACT ON MY LIFE”
"MY JOURNEY WITH LYL HAS BEEN NOTHING SHORT OF TRANSFORMATIVE"

Hello, I’m Mompati Tamari, a 30-year-old actively contributing to the Let Youth Lead (LYL) programme in Botswana. My role involves facilitating school outreach programmes and engaging students in various talk sessions. LYL, to me, is more than just a programme; it’s a place for learning and growth, especially since I grappled with shyness not too long ago.

My journey with LYL has been nothing short of transformative, bringing about exponential growth in various facets of my life. The programme opened doors to diverse opportunities, one of which led me to become a Peer Leader for a Sentebale-UNICEF initiative in 2023. This initiative, not directly tied to LYL, allowed me to create a network for young people living with HIV, conducting online meetings to discuss crucial topics such as ARV adherence and HIV disclosure. The ripple effect of this experience, all made possible by my LYL affiliation, has been nothing short of life-changing.

LYL played a pivotal role in boosting my confidence and helping me overcome my initial shyness. My active involvement in the school outreach programme allowed me to connect with students, delving into topics like abstinence, sexuality, ARV adherence, GBV, and SRHR. Beyond enhancing my confidence, this engagement significantly improved my communication skills, proving invaluable in my role as a community healthcare worker—especially when working with children born with HIV.

Reflecting on my journey, some moments stand out vividly. The initial meeting with the LYL team was a remarkable experience, where our connections were instant and genuine. Witnessing the triumph of the second HIV Youth Summit in 2019, a collective achievement, and extending a helping hand to a young lady who had defaulted from ART and is now a friend are etched in my heart.

Looking back, some moments really stick with me. The initial meeting with the LYL team was a remarkable experience, where our connections were instant and genuine. We just clicked. Then, seeing the success of the second HIV Youth Summit in 2019, where we even had Prince Seeiso from Lesotho, was a highlight. And helping hand to a young lady who had defaulted from ART and is now a friend is something I’ll always remember. Ole linked her to me for counselling sessions. She has been back on treatment and adhering well for two years now.

LYL has given me the gift of travel, traversing across Botswana and participating in the Big Valley Lodge retreat, a rich team-building and capacity-enhancing experience. These activities not only strengthened our roles as volunteers but also clarified the essence and purpose of the LYL movement.

A key lesson I’ve learnt from my LYL journey is not to judge a book by its cover. Initially perceiving shy individuals within LYL, I discovered the hidden potential in each, helping me break free from my own shell. LYL, for me, goes beyond being a mere advocacy group; it’s a collective of impassioned advocates striving for positive health changes. We aim to break down complicated health terms, utilizing youthful language to educate Batswana effectively.

To the youth of Botswana, my advice is simple – get tested and PrEP’ed. Know your health rights and responsibilities; it’s the pathway to empowerment.
RACHEL MAKHWAJE (25)

Hi there! I’m Rachel Makhwaje, a 25-year-old part of the Let Youth Lead (LYL) crew in Botswana. I hopped on board in 2021 because a friend got me interested, and boy, it feels like being part of a big, caring family. I’m all about making an impact and raising awareness about HIV and SRHR at schools.

LYL changed my life in big ways through the meetings and workshops that we do. They’re not just about learning; they’re about having a blast and getting educated at the same time. LYL opened my mind to mental health, helping me overcome negative vibes and heal from past wounds. The programme helped open my mind regarding mental health in my life and family too. In the last two years, I’ve learned to deal with critiques, boost my confidence, and accept myself. Plus, I’ve become pretty good at socializing and expressing myself these days.

Let’s talk about some unforgettable moments. The retreat workshop at Big Valley Game Lodge was a blast – full of adventures and laughter. Sip ‘n paint was awesome, and the gala dinner celebrating our First Lady as the UNAIDS Champion for AGYW was simply fantastic. She emphasized youth to take up space.

As for activities I enjoyed, the Big Valley experience was a mix of fun and learning interpersonal skills. Life is way better when you laugh and connect with others. The gala dinner celebrating our First Lady? Empowering and inspiring. It made me believe that, hey, one day I could be a leader too.

"LYL CHANGED MY LIFE IN BIG WAYS AND IT OPENED MY MIND TO MENTAL HEALTH"
SEKGABO SESELMARUMO (28)

I proudly serve as an LYL advocate and I’ve dedicated my efforts to championing the rights of young people affected, and those living with HIV. In this role I actively engage in initiatives, campaigns and projects that aim to empower, educate and elevate the voices of young people. Some of the initiatives include Radio Positive, Education Plus and attending conferences. One of my biggest involvements as a LYL advocate is being a presenter for Radio Positive, a programme that broadcasts on Duma FM and has great listenership. Through this radio programme I facilitate discussions on a wide range of topics affecting young people and also just ensuring that the content is relevant, up to date and impactful. Radio Positive serves as a platform to address issues related to HIV/AIDS, reducing stigma, understanding the community and just making sure that we advocate and talk more about our health and wellness as young people.

I joined the LYL programme in November 2018, after I participated in the first ever Youth Summit in 2017. It all started with me being deeply seated in the commitment in making a meaningful impact in young people’s lives. I have always just wanted to make sure that those that are affected by HIV and its challenges are able to live better lives. Being able to witness the impact and strides that LYL was making in addressing the needs of young people, inspired me to join and contribute actively towards these efforts. LYL aligns perfectly with my core beliefs in the power of youth-led initiatives and the potential of youth in driving change in the landscape of HIV awareness and support.

My experience in being part of LYL has been a very transformative journey that has profoundly influenced various aspects of my life. Through the LYL programme I’m empowered and my level of HIV advocacy has grown from when I joined to where I am now, and what I actively advocate for.

When it comes to my personal growth, it has been very instrumental. Engaging in advocacy efforts and interacting with fellow advocates has significantly broadened my perspective and deepened my understanding of critical issues. When it comes to community, through the different initiatives and campaigns, we have been able to make tangible changes in our community. With me, people reach out to me on Facebook after listening to the radio show or finding me on different social media platforms. They reach out to say that they have been inspired. Some have told me they have even gone to get themselves tested. Some have learnt how to better support their friends or family living with HIV. So that’s how I’ve impacted my community. Being part of LYL has provided unparalleled opportunities for professional development. Engaging in panel discussions, conferences and media initiatives has honed my skills in advocacy, public speaking and strategic communication. That’s how I’ve also managed to get some gigs when it comes to communication content development and radio. It is all through being part of the LYL programme. Also when it comes to education advocacy, the focus on education aligns so well with my passion of empowering youth through knowledge. So contributing towards initiatives like Education Plus, as well as radio, has helped me also when it comes to advocating more for education and making sure I know how to address the different HIV issues, and how to educate people to understand it better, rather than just reading big words.

Lastly, I think my network has grown, I have a very supportive network. The programme has connected me with like-minded individuals who share a commitment to creating positive change. This network has become a support system and also a site for collaboration and inspiration. We pull each other and inspire each other.

The Sentebale and Duma FM Radio Takeover Show that happened in 2018 during the World AIDS Day Commemoration at Rail Park mall was a great day for me. It was an outdoor broadcast and my first ever radio presenting opportunity. I will never ever forget that. It has been amazing.

Then in 2019 I met Prince Harry at the Sentebale Fundraising Concert in London. That was my first encounter with Prince Harry. Growing up I used to read a lot about Prince Harry and Prince William because they used to go to my village Maun a lot and do a lot of projects there. So now meeting him was-I don’t even know how to explain it- it was amazing. I have no words for it. It was an amazing experience to share my story living with HIV, and also share some of the challenges that young people go through in Southern Africa, with Prince Harry being there. It was amazing.
My third favourite memory was the outdoor radio broadcast in Kasane during Prince Harry’s royal visit to Botswana. It was very nice doing the live radio show with Bothe Kgosimore, who had initially trained us to be radio presenters. It was amazing presenting alongside her— it was out of this world. That also brings me to another great memory— my first ever radio training day in 2019 with Bothe at the Duma FM studios, where we were learning to present live radio with Bakang. That was amazing!

The activities I have enjoyed most are most definitely being part of the Radio Positive programme. It has been fulfilling. My other favourite activity is participating in panel discussions and conferences and just being a panelist and moderating discussions. I love that about being part of the LYL. Also just being part of the podcast team that developed the content. This allowed me to contribute, learn and also share my content creation skills.

Then the key lessons I have learnt from LYL is that advocacy is not a solitary endeavor, so you can’t do things alone guys. It thrives on collaboration. By working together, amplifying our collective voices and championing the causes that resonate with our passions, creates lasting impact. The programme has shown me that there is strength in unity, reminding me that our shared efforts can break down the barriers, challenge stereotypes and also pave the way for a more inclusive and empowered society. Recognise the strength in collaboration and find your voice. After that, let your voice lead you to making a difference in the world around you.

So to my fellow young people in Botswana, I would like you to embrace the power within you to be catalysts of change. The LYL has taught me that our voices matter and our actions can shape a better future. So I just want to encourage you to stand boldly for what you believe in, engage in conversations that matter and actively participate in initiatives that contribute positively towards transformations in our communities.
Hi, I’m Solomon Mokgothu, a 30-year-old advocate with the Let Youth Lead (LYL) programme in Botswana, proudly serving in this role for six impactful years, from 2018 to the present day. I belong to the first crop of LYL advocates, driven by a desire to contribute to the creation of a more responsible society by addressing HIV-related social issues and combating stigma. My role in the advocacy group is to defend and protect the rights and support young people living or affected by HIV in Botswana.

My journey with LYL has been incredibly educational, empowering me in leadership and activism. Through the programme, I’ve expanded my network and seized various opportunities that only the LYL platform could provide. This initiative has equipped me with a broader understanding of social issues surrounding HIV stigma and a valuable platform to contribute meaningfully to Botswana’s HIV national response.

Three moments stand out vividly in my memory. The first is the inaugural 2017 Youth HIV Summit, where young voices resonated, advocating for positive changes in the national response to the HIV pandemic. Next is the experience of attending the 2018 International AIDS Conference in Amsterdam, an unforgettable memory, my best if must say! Lastly, being selected as the International AIDS Society Ambassador of 2018 remains a cherished highlight.

The advice I’d like to share with youth: they should take up spaces and make use of the privileges that are in place for youth-led initiatives in Botswana. They should create the change that they want to see.

A key lesson from my journey is that small steps are vital in building bigger actions that can transform our future. While the LYL movement maybe small and exclusive, it has had a massive impact in shaping the HIV response in Botswana. So that is the key lesson that I’ve learned from the movement.

The purposes of the Let Youth programme were intended to provide young people with a platform to voice the challenges of young people living with or affected by the HIV epidemic in Botswana. Also, the programme’s initial intention is to actively engage young people with policymakers that can drive and influence positive changes in the country that can help foster HIV interventions that will support the younger generation of this country. That is the mandate of the programme. As an LYL advocate, my role involves engaging with policymakers and stakeholders, bridging the gap between them and the young voices across communities - working in the HIV space nationally. To stakeholders and policymakers, I emphasize the importance of continued support for the LYL movement.
I am a youth leader, a volunteer and an assistant with the LYL advocacy group. I have been part of LYL for 2 and a half years, and what led me to becoming a member was when I became a member of the first ever National Adolescent and Young People’s Forum. I got to learn about the LYL advocacy group and the place that it offered for me as a young person and a leader, to share our experiences and expertise regarding certain issues such as HIV/AIDS, mental health and so many other challenges that affect young people in our community.

I have had a life changing experience ever since becoming a part of the programme. I have found a family and a platform that has really empowered and developed me as an individual and as a leader. It has taught me the significance of coming together as young people, to lead through our own voices, to lead through our experiences and to effectively and meaningfully contribute to policy, laws, the activities and the advocacy that affects us as young people in the community. Being part of the programme really fuels my passion and commitment towards ensuring the sustainable development and the health and wellbeing of children in my community. It has really built a strong sense of leadership and commitment towards ensuring that, myself and other young people in my community are all advocated for.

One of the activities that really stood out to me was the mental health session with the therapist in Botse. Then the HIV/AIDS Youth Summit that was held in Palapye in 2021, and then in 2023 when we were preparing and shooting for the LYL Podcast. But overall, I think I really just enjoy all our sessions because we get to have them in an outdoor space which is fun and interactive. It is easier for us to share our experience, expertise and opinions. The sessions are fun and it enables us as young people to effectively contribute to the issues that affect us in a more fun, enjoyable and memorable way.

One key lesson that I’ve learnt from being part of the LYL programme is that every opinion, every voice, every messaging and every skill from any young person is meaningful and plays a pivotal role in driving change, one day at a time, for a future that is led and driven by us as young people.

My advice to young people in Botswana is that our engagement, our participation and our voice is significant and we are leaving no one behind in leading our communities towards the betterment of our health and our wellbeing. Take up space in your various communities to advocate and impact meaningfully towards the development of programmes, policies and advocacy for young people.
THABO BASEKI (28)

I have been a LYL Advocate for 4 years now. I was inspired to join after the LYL Youth Summit held in 2020. Personal stories that were shared by individuals such as Tlotlo and Joy were my source of inspiration at the event. Participating in the LYL programme has been a game changer for me. All the different people I’ve encountered, coupled with valuable insights and sessions with psychologists and experienced professionals in various fields, has significantly enhanced my life. The programme’s collaborative environment and the wealth of resources provided have collectively contributed to substantial improvements in my personal and professional journey.

Engaging in group sessions provided me with the chance to express my opinions, a privilege often denied to many individuals with disabilities. Delivering presentations on behalf of my peers not only allowed me to showcase my capabilities but also demonstrated that blindness doesn’t impede one’s abilities. This experience not only boosted my confidence but also, I reclaimed a sense of self-assurance that had been lost some time ago. Being actively involved at the Sentebale stall at the WHO Regional Summit in 2023 deepened my appreciation for the organization and served as a refreshing reminder of its core mission. Engaging with visitors and effectively presenting the LYL programme and Sentebale left a lasting impression, making the experience of promoting the programme and the organization truly memorable.

One key lesson, what can I say? Well, what I learnt from LYL is the power of compassion and commitment in making a positive impact. I learnt the importance of empathy and a dedication to addressing pressing social issues. LYL taught me that by being compassionate and committed to a cause, individuals and communities can contribute significantly to improving the lives of those in need. Whether it’s through raising awareness, providing essential resources, or offering support services, LYL demonstrates a unique potential of compassion and sustained effort in creating positive change.

To the young people of Botswana, as you navigate the exciting journey of youth, I would like to offer some advice inspired by the remarkable lessons I learned from LYL:

1. Embrace Compassion: Learn from LYL and Sentebale’s commitment to compassion. Understand the challenges faced by others in your community, and cultivate empathy. Small acts of kindness can make a significant difference in someone’s life.

2. Educate and Advocate: Empower yourselves with knowledge about pressing issues, especially those affecting your peers. Use your voices to advocate for positive change.

3. Support Each Other: LYL’s focus on supporting vulnerable children teaches us the importance of community. Be there for your friends and fellow youth. Create a network of support, as unity strengthens the ability to overcome challenges.

4. Emphasize Education: Education is a powerful tool for personal and societal growth. It opens doors to opportunities and equips you to contribute meaningfully to your community.

5. Break Stigmas: This one is really dear to my heart. LYL’s work confronts the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. Be advocates for breaking down social stigmas surrounding various issues. Foster an environment of understanding, acceptance, and support.

6. Take Initiative: Sentebale was founded by individuals who took initiative to address a critical need. Recognize your own capacity to instigate positive change. If you see an issue that needs attention, don’t hesitate to take the lead in finding solutions.

Remember, you have the potential to shape the future of Botswana positively. Take inspiration from LYL’s impactful work, and let your actions reflect a commitment to compassion, education, and community support.
TLOTLO MOILWA (24)

My role in LYL is very much attached to what I do as a human being. I am an HIV/AIDS activist. I advocate for young people living with HIV, which I have been doing for so many years as an individual, even before I became part of Sentebale or part of LYL.

I was there when the foundation was laid for LYL. This was in 2016, and it was just Masedi and I back then. That’s how long I’ve been with LYL, and Sentebale as a whole. That was even when Sentebale was formally launched in Botswana. What led me to joining? When I joined we were still trying to establish the whole idea of LYL. I was there when ideas were brought up. You know, I existed when the idea of LYL was launched. It was beautiful to see.

I really like that I get to work with diverse groups. It’s something I do every single day even outside of LYL. So it is nice that this space is aligned with my career as a whole- being in social work and helping people. So getting to work with people with disabilities and in spaces that care about mental health, people living with HIV, and other diverse groups, I really like that. I really get to learn a lot everyday.

Like I said before, at an individual level I’m an HIV/AIDS activist and I advocate for young people living with HIV. Through LYL, I have the ability to be closer to young people living with HIV. Some are from the Network of Young People Living with HIV, some are part of LYL. I have fellow activists and advocates in LYL, so I get to grow a lot. I learn, get ideas, implement them, know what to change and how to go about everything because of the people in LYL. Even when I need guidance, I always have people that I can turn to.

One of my first most memorable moments was when I met Prince Harry for the first time. That was in London in 2017. We had two LYL advocates from Lesotho and I was the only LYL advocate from Botswana there at the time. The other day Mis KT was telling someone about how much I cried for Prince Harry’s name tag after that meeting when a colleague from Lesotho beat me to it.

This other memorable moment was a bit personal. After I lost my grandmother in 2019, Prince Harry reached out (through 2 trusted individuals) to say he was sorry about my loss and sent hugs. As things turned out, after a week, I got a real big hug in Kasane during his visit to Botswana in September - our picture went viral. Yeah, that was another special moment. It just goes to show that this is not just work and us trying to help other people out there- it goes beyond that. We get support too. My other memorable moments are each time I get to be with other LYL advocates because we are such a vibe! I love that.

My advice to other young people in Botswana would be that they shouldn’t be too worried about having everything because others seem to have them. Use what you have available to you. A key lesson I want to leave with others is to have the willingness to learn from other people, Always!. 
I’m Trevor Rutherford, a 27-year-old advocate with Let Youth Lead (LYL) programme, and I’ve been part of this incredible journey since March 2023. In my role as an LYL Advocate, I mentor students, particularly teenagers, through the School Outreach Programme. The person who led me to this fulfilling role is my best friend, Gould. He invited me to a meeting, and from that moment, I found myself immersed in a world of advocacy that I now cherish.

My experience with LYL has been nothing short of exciting, fun, and incredibly informative. It doesn’t feel like typical advocacy; instead, it’s a continuous learning experience on how to connect with children of different age groups, understanding their perspectives, and effectively communicating with them. This exposure and involvement in the School Outreach Programme have significantly impacted my life, especially in working with children.

Memories from this journey are plenty. Firstly, the school outreach to Artesia, where we engaged with students on topics like bullying, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender-based violence (GBV), and listened to their struggles. It was about understanding and helping them navigate through their challenges. Secondly, the getaway to Big Valley Lodge was more than just fun; it was an opportunity to socialize with fellow advocates, learn practical skills for the workforce, and polish our CVs. Lastly, attending Mrs. Masisi’s gala dinner at Grand Palm Hotel was mind-blowing, providing insights into her impactful work and receiving the UNAIDS Champion honor.

One activity that brought me immense joy was learning how to facilitate as a young leader during the School Outreach Programme training. Creating games and icebreakers to make students feel comfortable and engaged was a highlight. And, of course, ziplining at Big Valley was an exhilarating experience, embracing the thrill of it all.

To young people in Botswana, my message is clear: don’t let your current circumstances define you. Whether facing health challenges, financial struggles, or bullying, remember that you are in charge of writing your future. Your efforts define where you’re going, so don’t let any situation limit your potential.

What LYL taught me is the beauty of being different – that it’s okay to be different. It’s okay not to know everything, especially in meetings. Authenticity is key; being yourself is not only accepted but encouraged. Learning to be myself and enjoying the work as my authentic self is a lesson I’ve cherished.
Hello, I’m Tshepang Mongweemang, a 29-year-old member of Let Youth Lead (LYL) Programme. I wear the hat of a facilitator, engaging in various activities, from community outreach to school programmes. I’ve been part of this incredible advocacy group since October 2022, and it has been a year filled with eye-opening experiences. My journey with LYL began when a fellow advocate explained the organization’s mission, programmes, and impact, prompting me to join. Little did I know that this decision would open doors I never thought possible.

LYL has been a game-changer in my life, offering me insights into issues I didn’t know existed. There are many doors that opened that I never thought would open for me since being part of LYL. It has motivated me more to give back to the community and has reshaped my views on HIV and individuals living with the virus. Meeting young people living openly with HIV has been a rare and uplifting experience, challenging societal norms and stereotypes.

The most memorable moments with LYL include getting to know people with different gender orientations, attending seminars and conferences, and going on exciting excursions like the one at Big Valley. I’ve attended seminars and conferences that I never thought I would attend in my life for example: The Botswana Network on Ethics, Law and HIV/AIDS (BONELA) seminar for one about the new HIV treatment innovation – Long Acting Injectables as substitute for existing ARV pills and the 73rd session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa! These opportunities are a result of being a member of the LYL programme. These experiences have been refreshing and mind-blowing, especially for someone like me coming from a less privileged background.

The most enjoyable activity that I did was going to Big Valley, it was amazing. Coming from a community or a home where we are not that privileged, Let Youth Lead gave me that opportunity to go out there and explore during retreats. It was really, really nice. I love it here!

Let Youth Lead is a programme dedicated to advocating for the rights of young people, especially concerning HIV/AIDS issues. The inclusivity of different sexual orientations among its advocates is commendable. Policymakers should recognize the invaluable perspectives these young advocates bring to the table. Including them in decision-making processes is essential, as they understand the challenges firsthand and can contribute meaningfully to effective solutions.

In conclusion, the Let Youth Lead programme has not only empowered me but has equipped me to be a voice for others. Advocacy is about making a difference every day, and with the right support, young people can contribute significantly to shaping a better future.

One crucial lesson from LYL advocates is the importance of being true to oneself. Witnessing the authenticity and freedom of young people within the group has emphasized the significance of embracing one’s true identity. In a society where many hide their sexual orientation or health status due to fear of stigma, the lesson of authenticity is particularly heartfelt.
WARONA GEORGE (28)

Hey, I’m Warona George, and I’m 28 years old. In the world of advocacy, I wear multiple hats in the LYL programme—researcher, trainer, and note-taker. My role involves digging into development and usage issues, figuring out how to enhance our programme, and sharing insights on accessibility with fellow advocates. I’ve been part of Let Youth Lead (LYL) since September 2021, jumping in without much research because my then colleagues, Bakang Garebatho and Botle Mooketsi, both LYL advocates, convinced me to join. Little did I know that this leap of faith would change my life.

LYL, which stands for Let Youth Lead, is a gathering of diverse individuals with different backgrounds and interests. We’re united by a common passion for similar issues in the development space. It’s beautiful to witness how our differences become strengths, allowing us to build solutions, innovations, and advocacy agendas together. Despite our diverse lives, we create a safe space for understanding and openness.

“I don’t think I could have ever predicted how much the LYL programme would do for me in my personal life, with my personal growth, and in terms of my development as an individual, as a researcher, and as someone working in development. As someone who cares about young people and their access to, and knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and rights, I could have never ever in my life predicted that I would learn so much about myself, advocacy, development. If it wasn’t for this programme, I wouldn’t have gotten so much access to the spaces and people I have encountered, without it being in a professional setting. It has given me an alternative perspective and experience on life and the development space, and I am not sure where else I could have ever found that.”

LYL has impacted my life profoundly - making me more empathetic, a better listener, and aiding my understanding of advocacy. It’s not only about being the voice for the voiceless; it’s about being great listeners, creating safe spaces, and representing the voices of those not in the rooms we enter. When we get the opportunity to be in rooms that they can’t be in we make sure that we are actually representing their voice and not making decisions for them. LYL has given me the confidence to push into spaces where young people are often sidelined, teaching me that nobody can sideline you. If there’s no space, make it for yourself. LYL has given me the backbone to raise my voice relentlessly for youth issues...advocacy is an everyday process and advocacy doesn’t happen overnight.

Three standout moments define my LYL journey. The podcast, where I served as a host and creative producer. It allowed me to reflect on our journey, discuss critical issues, and appreciate the impact of LYL advocates. Representing advocates at a conference in Cape Town broadened my understanding of advocacy in Southern Africa. Being the rapporteur for the first-ever physical meeting of the network of young people living with HIV in Botswana, although not directly under LYL, showcased the real impact of such initiatives on young lives. Sometimes with the hustle and bustle of everyday life, you forget how impactful the work we do can be, and you forget how empowering it is to have a safe space and support.

I enjoy getting together with other advocates, unpacking issues, and understanding how we can move forward. LYL gives us a space to navigate the difficulties of advocacy together. My advice to young people in Botswana is simple - be open, learn, volunteer, and try new things. Find something you care about, try new experiences, and continue doing what feels right.

The key lesson I’ve learned is that advocacy is an everyday process. It’s not about big things; it’s in the day-to-day conversations, the information shared, and the continuous learning. For policymakers and stakeholders, I want them to know that LYL consists of enthusiastic, capable, and knowledgeable young people ready to contribute significantly to the development of young people in Botswana.
Call to Action by Let Youth Lead Advocates

“To the stakeholders and policymakers, I would like them to know that we are passionate about what we do. We as advocates are passionate. LYL is really changing lives in a positive way. And it’s impacting a lot of young generations that are going to be the future. The future leaders, future doctors, the future police officers. We are eager to go the extra mile, bring change, and contribute to impacting more lives positively. The work we do is encouraging and informative, and involving us in decision-making processes will only strengthen our collective impact. Involve us, ask us, learn from us!”

Trevor Rutherford

“We are a youth driven programme that sharpens the voice of the youth and makes sure the youth voice is heard. Youth advocates are catalysts for change— we have diverse perspectives and solutions for the issues that we face. It is easier to drive a point when you have experienced that challenge. You can speak from the shoes of the people who know the issue personally. LYL youth advocates have the passion for social justice. Our commitment comes from a genuine desire to address issues such as discrimination, inequality and other issues that are faced by youth. So I would like policymakers to invest in LYL advocates and their future because our energy, creativity and dedication towards contributing to a more sustainable and equitable world can’t even be measured. Stakeholders should collaborate more towards fostering greater impact for LYL’s advocacy work. Policymakers and stakeholders should recognise and value the active role that LYL advocates play in shaping a better future. Our work isn’t just an expression of our needs, but a proactive contribution towards building an inclusive, just and sustainable society.”

Gould Baratedi
“I want you to recognise the profound impact that the LYL and advocates can have in shaping policies and programmes. LYL advocates are passionate, informed and committed individuals that bring unique perspectives to the table. Our work goes beyond discussions. We actively engage in initiatives that address the needs of young people in Botswana. So it’s very important for stakeholders to understand that the advocacy work done by LYL is transformative. When it comes to raising awareness on SRHR, and to contributing to projects that enhance the wellbeing of young people. The programme fosters a generation of advocates who are capable of driving positive change. We as advocates are not only beneficiaries, we are also contributors to our communities’ growth. Therefore policymakers should recognize us by investing in our programmes, supporting our initiatives and investing in the development of young people who influence these policies and contribute towards the community’s well being and drive sustainable change. This will be an investment in the future of Botswana to be able to lead with resilience and commitment towards building a better tomorrow.”

Sekgabo Seselamarumo

“Shout out to Diamonds Do Good and Sentebale for affording us this opportunity. Also, the LYL is very integral in the space we work in, and in the time we live in, and with the prevalence rates we have. Young people are more inclined to listen to other young people. They align with what we say, so the LYL programme is important. It gives other young people a voice that they know is there’s. A voice that they know understands the issues they are talking about. It is not just old men and old women around a table discussing youth issues. It is also young people there saying, “this is what we know young people need, and we are willing to be their voices.” This is exactly what LYL has been since the year that it started.”

Bothe Mooketsi
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