Aileen Getty Comes Clean

Shouldn’t one of America’s wealthiest PWAs have it all? Maybe having it all was part of the problem.

May 1, 1996 By Judith Lewis

She hugs me hard, and she smells like heaven. Aileen Getty has just scurried down the stairs of her Hollywood hillside home to greet me, even though I’ve only dropped by to pick up a videotape of her *Dateline NBC* appearance and hadn’t expected to see her. But here she is, fresh off a three-day hospital stay, and she hugs me, an utter stranger, with an earnest abandon that’s often missing in the arms of one’s closest friends. She is a wisp of a thing, dressed in a white gauze blouse and a sarong-like skirt the color of Caribbean water. In her sense of style there is a lifetime of money and a veneer of confidence, but in her demeanor there is an unnerving lack of guile, the kind of uncertainty that comes from doing time in the depths of loneliness. I am fascinated by her, and thus I am flustered.

“Do you want an iced tea?” she asks, furrowing her brow and scratching her forehead a little nervously. “Some water?”

“No,” I say, “I’m fine. I, um, I have to get back to the office.”

With that, I flee down the stone steps and the long, steep driveway through the verdigris gate. I don’t think I thanked her.

It would be nice to write about Aileen Getty without identifying her first as an heiress, as the granddaughter of the late oil baron J. Paul Getty, as the sister of Paul, who lost an ear to Italian gangsters at 16 and his lucidity to a stroke at 25. Aileen would probably appreciate a description of herself so separate from her legacy, distanced as she seems from it, damaged as she has been by the side effects of privilege. But such an independent identity will never be hers to enjoy, in her lifetime or after, so let’s get it over with: Aileen Getty is the 36-year-old daughter of Jean Paul Getty, Jr. by his first wife, Gail; she should be partial heir to her family’s $750 million share of the J. Paul Getty fortune. Which only means that when Aileen has a showing of her art at a gallery, the critics get more pissed off than usual if they don’t like the art. It also means that now, deep in the throes of her 11-year-long battle with AIDS, she doesn’t have to worry so much about how to pay her medical bills.

What she does worry about is being misunderstood for all that she believes and represents. Aileen Getty is full of metaphors and imagery and lists of pronouncements about life, death and being a

Getty, and she has paid dearly for her frankness. Her recent interview with Jane Pauley of *Dateline* stands as a cautionary example of what can happen to someone this young, beautiful, famous and sick with AIDS: You muster the will to speak up about your illness and get rewarded with shame. The *Dateline* footage is painful to watch: As Aileen struggles through a medicated haze to explain her complicated life lessons in soundbites suitable for broadcast, Pauley, well-coiffed and smug, poses for a camera that's far more sympathetic to her networked-over persona than it is to her subject. "I'm happy I have AIDS," says Aileen, in all her unstudied candor. Pauley frowns, and tilts her head quizzically to one side. "Can you *explain* that to me?" she demands. "Oh!" Aileen backtracks. "You must think I'm a total *idiot*."

In fact, Pauley does seem to consider Aileen some degree of idiot, and later in the broadcast she does her best to convince her viewers of the same. It only helps Pauley's mission that Aileen was admittedly "using and not clear," at the time of the interview. It also helps that Aileen made this confession in a letter to her father, which he promptly and considerately faxed to Pauley.

Like I said: It would be nice to write about Aileen and not dwell on the peculiarities of the Getty family. It seems far more worthwhile, at this point, to dwell instead on what it means when Aileen says, not like a total idiot but as a woman who's taken the hard, long road to truth, that AIDS, in her words, "is a phenomenal gift."

If it hadn't been for HIV, I would still be a victim," Aileen says. "Victimized by my parents, by my legacy, by life. I'd been in seven institutions, I'd had 12 shock treatments, I'd had seven miscarriages. I was anorexic, a self-mutilator. I'd been there and back." In the most simplistic terms, it sounds like she was making one desperate bid for attention after another. "Right," says Aileen. "And the ultimate attention comes from death, and now I've got AIDS. I think it's probably been a lifetime of trying to die in order to be loved." If this version of Aileen Getty, the one I sit down with two days after our first brief meeting, has little in common with the feckless child on the *Dateline* videotape, she has just as little in common with the composed, preppy-looking woman smiling out from her publicity photos. When she welcomes me to her house this time with somewhat -- but not a whole lot -- more reserve, I wonder not how the girl who had everything got so messed up, but how the woman whose father faxed her personal correspondence to Jane Pauley remains so unguarded, so dangerously honest, in the presence of a journalist. "I don't have a choice," she explains when I ask her why she'd ever consent to another interview. "I feel a responsibility to be public, although it's not my nature to be public.

"I'm not always familiar with the things that I've said, because before I speak or do any interview, I always pray," says Aileen, who believes in Jesus but not necessarily in church. "I'm terrified of the public and I'm terrified of interviews and I'm terrified of cameras, and I always pray to be a vehicle for something larger than myself. I always pray to not be myself so I don't really relate to anything outside of the situation right here. But when you're public domain you do feel like, a...what are they called? Those Motel 8's or whatever. I feel industrialized. Fortunately, I don't suffer from it, I don't take it to bed with me. I live actually a very simple life, a very unglamorous life, a very real, good life. A real good life. I love my life."

It is early March, one of those stunning days in Southern California when the air is suddenly full of jasmine and the breeze is warm but as yet smog-free; the kind of day that makes it hard to think about leaving this world. The sun is beating down on Aileen's brutally sunny patio, but she is soaking in it, draped in a black dress over black suede Doc Marten boots, her long, silky brown hair brushed back over one side of her face. Her 12-week-old German shepherd puppy, Texas, scrambles around our feet and tugs at Aileen's sleeves, much to the dismay of Aileen's manager, Steve Grissom, who is doing his best to control a situation that will forever be out of anyone's control. In his friend and client's own best interest, Steve would really prefer that Aileen avoid talking too much about drugs and out-of-body experiences. But Aileen, ever the rebel, is adamant. "Don't avoid the drug issue," she advises in a voice made husky and nasal by cigarettes and tuberculosis, and in an accent that betrays her multilingual childhood. "It's not something I want to avoid. I think it's very important to deal with drugs and HIV. It's very prevalent. They're two separate diseases, both lethal. But just because you've got HIV it doesn't automatically put alcoholism into remission."

In fact, Aileen attests, AIDS too often exacerbates addiction. "Drugs are about control over fear," she says, "and when you have AIDS, your lack of control is all that much more evident. I tried to make up for that lack of being in control with a lot of cocaine. That's definitely not the way to do it."

It has been nearly three months since Aileen nearly died, of toxicity and weakness, in her doctor's office, and nearly three months since she made a commitment to get sober. "I was clinically dead," she says. "I went through the whole out-of-body experience and everything; it was probably the clearest memory I've ever had. And there was a moment where I got to choose whether to come back or not, and I didn't know if I wanted to live. I have a lot of shame about that," she confesses. "Life is given to one with so much love. It broke my heart when I realized I'd turned my back on it."

"On the lip of life," as she puts it, Aileen chose life; she learned to "walk its circumference instead of fucking it down the middle." And she finally understood she didn't want either disease to kill her. "It's a hell of an achievement," she boasts, "to get sober with HIV." Aileen has known since 1985 that she was HIV positive, and shortly afterward she was diagnosed with AIDS. But it wasn't until 1991, after Magic Johnson disclosed his condition to the media, that Aileen went public, too, via Kevin Sessums in *Vanity Fair*, "because HIV was something that required a woman to stand up and speak the truth." Aileen's truth came in increments at first. She initially claimed that she'd become infected through a blood transfusion, but within the year, as her support increased and shame diminished, she admitted that she had contracted HIV from unprotected sex in an extramarital affair -- a disclosure that, at the time, led to the dissolution of her eight-year marriage to Christopher Wilding, Elizabeth Taylor's son by Michael Wilding.

Aileen is now engaged to be remarried, to 40-year-old documentary filmmaker Jay Brown, but Taylor has remained the woman Aileen calls mom, and her former daughter-in-law's illness has added fuel to Taylor's ongoing fundraising efforts for AIDS research and treatment. In the past four years, Aileen has become an activist, too: Around the same time that her story hit the media,

Homestead Hospice, a Los Angeles-based network of shelters for people with AIDS, approached her about sponsoring a home for women with the disease, and her energy helped establish a house in the South Bay city of Lawndale called the Dallas House, named for a boy Aileen mothered for five years. Aileen hopes to open a second hospice in Hollywood, calling it the Aileen Getty House. “It’s a wish,” she says. “But money is hard to come by, and raising it is very political. People expect commendation and notoriety for their generosity. Obviously, it’s a lot more inviting to give to the Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation than it is to give to the Homestead Hospice.”

Part of the startup money for the Dallas House came from a benefit performance of *The Seagull* at LA’s Fountain Theater, which Aileen’s friend Bud Cort staged in her honor. On the night of the performance, Aileen was hospitalized with tuberculosis. And to the delight of theatergoers, Elizabeth Taylor showed up in her place.

The Dallas House also receives proceeds from sales of L.A. Eyeworks “Luck” glasses, which Aileen models in a pensive, chiaroscuro magazine ad. The money helps sustain the house’s $165,000 annual operating budget; it helps “keep our girls in bed and fed,” Aileen says. It’s a meager budget, says house manager Joan Crawford, who relies heavily on volunteeers from the community, and this time of year finds herself making frequent visits to the food shelves. “It’s pinched,” she says. “I’m operating on a shoestring.” (“Of course,” she adds cheerfully, “around the holidays our cupboards are overflowing.”) Dallas died of AIDS three years ago, at the age of 11; a smiling, handsome portrait of him in a football jersey hangs on Aileen’s living room wall. But “there’s more to Dallas than the Dallas House,” Aileen announces, taking off her right boot and rolling down her sweatsock to reveal an elaborate tattoo. The tattoo bears the names of the two sons she had with Wilding, Caleb, now 12, and Andrew, 11, their names joined in a rosary with Dallas.

"Andreew! Andreeeeew! *Dove estare?!*“ Aileen is marching around the house, feigning authority, as her housekeeper, Sandra, stands in the kitchen pretending to be bewildered. ”He’s hiding," Sandra whispers, putting a finger to her lips. Aileen continues stomping about, whimsically demanding to know her son’s whereabouts *at once*. Suddenly, Andrew springs from behind a chair in the corner of the kitchen, laughing raucously. We all act terribly surprised.

Andrew’s brother, Caleb, is out for the day with friends, and Andrew himself has spent most of the morning upstairs playing Myst on the Macintosh. He’s a stout, happy-looking kid, old enough to know that men in this culture shake hands in professional situations, but not jaded enough to be committed to the ritual. “Nice to meet you!” he says, perfunctory and matter-of-fact, and shakes my hand for that necessary instant before running off to continue his activities. As he walks away, I notice he’s wearing a Cowboys cap. Across the back, it reads “Dallas.” “They’re both wonderful, wonderful, wonderful children and my very best friends,” says Aileen. Working out custody with Wilding hasn’t been a battle, she says, so much as a series of negotiations. “Things work out very well for the most part. I’m looking forward to six months of sobriety so that during the weekends they can spend the night here, because as of now they can only stay until the evening and then they go back to their father. I drug-test in a few more months, and I’ll have the time and the required amount of tests to be able to have them sleep here.”

It sounds like that future should be an incentive to secure her sobriety, but according to Aileen, alcoholism doesn't work that way. "Unfortunately, it's such a cunning, evil disease, that there's really no such thing as an incentive. There's only a change of will."

Caleb and Andrew know everything about their mother's life, Aileen says; about both her addiction and her HIV status. Honesty has been "really, really important" in their upbringing, and while there are many people who would take issue with that strategy, Aileen's defense of it hints at the deprivation she suffered in her own childhood. "I feel so strongly that if you deal with things in the present as they're happening, you have a far better chance of being able to cope with life, of being able to balance joy and grief, as opposed to trying to rehabilitate memories," she says. "Memories are not based in truth, and therefore they can't be treated symptomatically, appropriately.

"Everyone has a right to participate in one's life and in one's death. I think I would rob my children of something they have a right to if I were to not tell them that I was supposedly going to die, or that I'm an alcoholic. They have that right to confront those challenges now, rather than later. And I think that oftentimes what we call grief after death is not grief but guilt, regret that we have not fully participated in the life of a loved one. There's more guilt to grief than sadness."

Guilt is not an emotion Aileen Getty has much interest in these days, unless she's working on eradicating it from her life and, to hear her talk, from everyone else's. Her contention that AIDS has improved her life is loaded and controversial, implying as it does that everyone who suffers a tragedy does so for a pre-ordained -- or at least meaningful -- reason. I admit to her that when I recently broke my finger -- a trivial accident, to be sure -- there was a part of me that wanted it to happen. "Well, not *wanted*..." I start to modify that statement, but Aileen stops me. "No! Say it! Really, it's OK. I'm proud of you for admitting that! That's so cool."

"But it's radical," I remind her. "People get angry when you talk about it, they think you're saying they caused their own troubles."

"It's only radical," she corrects, "because we're dishonest. There are no mistakes and no one's guilty of anything. I don't have bad parents, I haven't been a bad child. Everything that's been given to me and I've given has been exactly what's been needed, and what's been given to me has sustained my life to this day. And this day is perfect, therefore what's been given to me is perfect."

The view from Aileen's patio today is perfect indeed. Hollywood lies at her feet in a sprawl of low-lying buildings, and when the sun is in the right place -- neither too low on the horizon nor too bright and high -- you can see the Pacific Ocean sparkling from miles away. Although she has just had her third encounter with a stalker, the gate at the bottom of the driveway remains open to the world, a defiant gesture to the "obese fear ghosts" Aileen has been beating down for most of her life. Looking out on this vista, I wonder if she believes in her heart everything she's saying, and how long she'll believe it. How long she'll be able to sustain her strained soul on the love she says AIDS left her with after it stripped everything else away; the one thing she never had handed to her on that proverbial silver spoon.

She tells me that AIDS is a phenomenal episode in history. “It’s the greatest war we’ve ever fought, and the most cunning of all because all we’ve got are weapons. We’re about artillery as opposed to love. And it’s love that will heal this ailment.”

Aileen says now that she’s dedicating her life to eliminating the public’s fear of AIDS and the people who have it, “so that people can learn to share this virus with us.” She is working on a book and a public-service announcement for NBC. She’d like to do an HIV-related comedy show, “something MTV-ish,” according to Grissom.

“My whole purpose,” she concludes, “is to welcome people inside the burning house.”

And how, I wonder, do you do that?

“By loving them. And knowing I can put out the fire.”

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