Clean and Sober

An addict with HIV kicks at the dark

August 1, 1998 By Mike DeStefano

New York City. July 10, 1985. Heading downtown from the Bronx on the No. 6 train to get my daily dose of methadone. I was 18 years old and addicted to heroin, running from a childhood of beatings and neglect. The heat was intense, but I wore a long-sleeved shirt to cover the little holes and black-and-blue marks on my arms.

That train ride to the city would be my last. I was at the end of my rope and couldn't take another day of the hustle to get "fixed." I picked up my dose and headed home. A scary feeling came over me: I was not going to survive another summer of shooting dope.

When I got home, the house was empty. I was high on methadone, along with some heroin, cocaine and various pills. I shot up, then lay down on my parents' bed. I rolled up my sleeves so they'd see the tracks on my arms. I thought, "They'll find me and then they'll know." I would wake up in a hospital where I'd be saved, or not wake up at all. Either way, it would end.

My parents found me passed out on their bed. They shook me into consciousness and rushed me to emergency. The doctor said if I kept it up, I'd be dead by September. So they took me to rehab. I went through withdrawal in a week, but got so sick that I couldn't walk for a month. I could hardly lift my head.

After about 40 days, I was able to get around pretty well and even keep some food down. The most amazing thing is that I wanted to stay. For the first time ever, I felt safe. This guy Anthony came into my room 10 times a day and wiped my head with a wet towel and told me it was going to be OK. I believed him because he was a junkie, too, and he'd been clean for two months. Eventually I was able to sleep well and wake up without cramps or vomiting.

There is not enough paper in this magazine to describe the incredible journey of getting off—and staying off—dope, but I will tell you it was the hardest thing I've ever done. Not only did I have to give up my "best friend," I had to start dealing with why I did drugs in the first place.

After three years of exploring my deepest, darkest secrets, I graduated from the program. When asked to be a counselor, I jumped at the offer. AIDS was hitting home, as a few of my friends from treatment had tested positive. I wanted to know all I could about HIV. It wasn't easy, but I gained

tons of knowledge. Unfortunately, it didn't come in handy two years later when I took the test myself.

Things were getting hot and heavy with this girl. It was several years since I'd been at risk, so I was pretty sure I was negative. Then again, why was I any different from Anthony, Chris, Fran and the other addicts I knew who had either died or were waiting to get sick?

I wasn't. When my test came back positive, my HIV training went out the window. I hadn't a clue to the numbness and fear. It was like being afraid of the dark even when the lights are on.

Here I was, 22, having spent the past few years getting my life together and now it seemed as good as over. Violent thoughts raced through my mind. I felt dirty, poisonous and wished I'd just die. I waited for the bogey man to get me.

Part of being an addict is thinking there's an easy way out of things. HIV proved to have no easy way out. It was so hard to stay clean back then. I didn't want to shoot up anymore, so I drank. A lot. But it only slightly dulled the pain. One night my buddies and I were at a bar when a real skinny man walked by. One woman we were with said, "Hey, look, the AIDS poster boy!" and laughed. It was too much to bear. A rage inside me was about to explode.

I jumped in my car and headed back to the only real relief I'd ever known. I got my dope and was right back where I left off. It only took a week to get as low as I had been right before I stopped using—sitting in a puddle next to a garbage can with a needle in my hand. This guy walked over, kicked me and said, "Get the fuck off my block, junkie!" At that moment I knew I'd rather face the bogey man with dignity than die in the gutter with shame.

So I picked myself up and went to a 12-step group. I said, "My name is Mike and I'm an addict with HIV and I need help." About seven other people came up to me after and said, "Hey, I got it too." They turned on the lights and the bogey man went away.

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