Grandmother Theresa

Theresa Mirabile survives the Mob, drugs and AIDS in the family

May 1, 1997 By Matt Connor

If you've never met an HIV positive former heroin-addict grandma whose husband was bumped off by the Mob -- and really, how many of us have? -- you might conjure the image of a defeated soul hardened by a lifetime of tragic turns.

Don't bet on it. When the elevator opens in the lobby of Bailey House, the Greenwich Village facility that provides housing for PWAs, and Theresa Mirabile steps out, one is greeted by a warm, matronly presence in a floral dress. Kind of Mayberry's Aunt Bea as an urban hipster.

With an easy grin and an infectious chuckle, Mirabile, 58, projects a lighthearted attitude all the more endearing given her history.

"My favorite saying is that people are creatures of their environments," Mirabile says between excited bites of a particularly greasy cheeseburger at a nearby coffee shop. "And I've been in a lot of environments!"

Raised in Staten Island, New York, she married twice and had five children between 1955 and 1961. Husband No. 3 was a wealthy businessperson who ran a sheetrock-distribution company.

"Then my husband was shot to death," Mirabile says, chuckling at the waiter who's dropped his tray of food. "He made some bad moves with the Mob and was murdered."

She was left with the house, the car, the credit cards and the kids. She knew what money she had wouldn't last, so she opened a bar. The tavern was successful for more than a decade, but a bad fall at the bar left Mirabile with a severe back injury. She was hobbling on crutches when one of her customers offered her something for the pain.

"He said I'd get an injection in my arm, just like at the doctor's office," Mirabile recalls. "I didn't know anything about drugs. In the '60s, I was raising children -- that whole drug thing passed me by. But I started giving this guy money to buy 'pain medicine.'"

Several months later she was hooked on heroin. Mirabile would drive into crime-torn neighborhoods in search of narcotics. "I'm telling you it was crazy," she says with a laugh and a french fry. "I'd park my Cadillac five blocks away and walk. It was insane."

When Mirabile found out she was positive three years ago, she gave her children money to buy a house in the Poconos -- and “whatever I had left went in my arm.” Then she checked herself into a detox program and told her children she was HIV positive and addicted to heroin. They’d never had an inkling about her drug problem. But she was in for something of a shock herself.

“When I told my son I had the AIDS virus, he told me he had it, too. Otherwise I guess I wouldn’t have known. But I understood. I sympathized with him.” Her son, Leonard, died in 1995 at age 36.

Mirabile is perpetually optimistic. Between trips to the Poconos to visit the nine grandchildren she adores, she sneaks greasy burgers, takes computer classes and attends an occasional mass at St. Veronica’s Catholic Church. Protease inhibitors have done wonders, and she’s making plans to get a job and eventually move out of Bailey House.

“I have to do something with the rest of my life,” Mirabile says. "It’s going to be a while, you know what I’m saying? And I’m looking forward to what I have left.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Grandmother-Theresa-1721-2094