High Crimes

Lillian Thiemann was once bad news in a dark alley. Now she's shooting from the hip about her life after "the life."

March 1, 2000 By Lillian Thiemann

Let's face it. In this country, it's illegal to be an addict. Maybe you can't be jailed for addiction per se, but you can be put away for everything else: for possession and for every small and large crime you have to commit to support your habit.

Most of the HIV positive dope fiends I know have been in the joint at least once. And if by luck they've escaped HIV infection when they go to prison—but continue to use while there—odds are they'll be positive before they're released. One friend, a dope fiend for decades, recently got out of the joint and tested positive at the age of 60. On the outside, he'd been relatively safe, with access to needle exchange; inside, it was a different story. But my guess is that most people would figure he got what he deserved.

As for me, I didn't start out as a criminal, nor did I come from a family that tolerated crime. I was a cherished only daughter, and no one thought I'd choose heroin as a career or become infected with HIV and hepatitis C. As a teenager, my crimes were petty: a little theft here, a little pot dealing there. Nothing out of the ordinary. But by age 20, my hunt for money had become a way of life, spurred on by the euphoric heroin highs I'd even steal from my grandmother to score—and by my fear of withdrawal.

At some point, junkies make an unconscious choice about, shall we say, style: Victim or predator? Becoming a victim means that in order to maintain your habit, you find a series of people to take care of you— people you have to do just about anything for, including take a tremendous amount of abuse. Becoming a predator means hurting others instead. I chose the latter. No one was going to get between me and my drugs. My need for them made me very, very dangerous and allowed me to bury any fear for my own life and future.

If I heard there was dope being sold that was so strong that people were dying from it, well, it seemed reasonable to climb over rubble and through a hole in the wall of a dark, abandoned building stinking of urine to get it. And when some punk motherfucker tried to take me off with a piece-of-shit .32, what could I do? In those years, if you tried to take me off, or you had something I wanted that you weren't willing to hand over, I'd feel justified in hurting you bad.

I wasn’t HIV positive during my criminal career, but people I know who are still “in the life” say that becoming positive made them stop caring about what happened to them—or to others. They sank into feelings of shame, coupled with rage at a society that does little to aid or accept addicts. My friend Pasquale used to say, “I have no hope. All I have is AIDS and a big habit.” When I’d push him to leave the criminal life, he’d say, “What else can I do?” I never came up with an acceptable (to him) answer, and now he’s dead. The message that there is life after heroin, crime and HIV is not making it to the people who need it most.

In the present system, when a user gets arrested, the opportunity for rehab is over. The only thing most prisons know how to do is punish—as if addiction and infection weren’t punishment enough. But incarcerating HIV positive people for nonviolent drug-related crimes is like using a hammer to drive in a screw. You’ll get the job done, but you’ll destroy the screw.

What HIV positive drug users need is humane medical treatment and the educational and therapeutic opportunities to change. I am proof that no matter how far down the road you’ve gone, you can turn back. It took an enormous leap of faith—the suspension of my bone-deep distrust of everyone—but, luckily, I had Robin, a case manager at my methadone clinic, who did not give up on me. Through the tools of therapy, a 12-step sobriety program and a dedication to spiritual practice, I grew into the woman I was meant to be: a drug-free survivor who has found a way to serve her community.

I don’t often look back on my days in the life, but something a woman said at last fall’s National Conference on Women and HIV/AIDS broke like an ice-cold wave over my head: “The only difference between me and the women inside is I never got caught!” I knew that for all the HIV positive dope fiends out there feeling hopeless, I had to tell it—guns, grandma and all. We must wake up to the fact that America’s way of fighting the drug problem doesn’t work. It’s time to try something completely different: decriminalization of drug use; accessible drug treatment, housing, job training and health care; and, while we’re at it, a little compassion.

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