Junk Mail

A countess of counterculture comes clean

March 1, 1999 By Lillian Thiemann

Junkies. Needle freaks. Skag users. These are the bastard stepchildren in the AIDS family. IV-drug use is considered by many HIVers to be the dirtiest way to get infected. Shooters. Hypes. Mainliners. And my favorite, dope fiends. If you're a woman who got HIV from needle use, you're just plain nasty.

I'm a woman with HIV who shot dope and worked it like a job for 17 years. While I was a player, I never felt I was on the lowest rung of society's ladder. In fact, I had contempt for people with "normal" lives. In my skewed view they were weak, frightened little creatures, unsuited to leading such an exciting and dangerous life as mine.

Such people were simply fair game. Anyone who has lived the hard-core dope life knows what I mean. I evaluated everyone I met the way a predator sizes up its prey. In my drug-using years, I cut a swath through humanity wide enough to drive a truck through. I refer to that time in my life as a period of lucrative alternative economic ventures—a nice way to describe the sometimes-violent criminal activity that many junkies get into.

Back then, I got information about AIDS from the street, in whispers. No one wanted to believe it could happen to them. Those who got caught (infected) were stupid, unlucky or just careless. Of course, I was none of the above. I had perfected the high art of successful IV-drug use. A countess of counterculture, I was too classy for AIDS.

By the mid-'80s, my alternative economic organization was no more. All the members were either in prison, dead, informers wishing they were dead or, like me, on the run. Hiding in the streets of New York City's Lower East Side was no picnic. One winter I stayed in an apartment with a floating population of four to 12 people and no heat, food or electricity. At night, we huddled in a double bed, wearing every piece of clothing we owned, shivering with cold and withdrawal and waiting for dawn, when we could cop some dope.

Half a block away was the shooting gallery, a dark hole of a place with a small, filthy kitchen and a room with a bed buried in a stinking pile of rags and refuse. I'll always identify the stench in that stairway—a mix of urine and curry—with speedballing (mixing heroin and cocaine in the same syringe).

Committed to feeding my addiction, there I was one day: dope-sick, a speedball shot in my pocket and no clean works. On the street, as often happens, there was no new set of works to be had; no bleach in the apartment, either. The rational thing would have been to go to the store and buy some.

But I couldn't. It was impossible for me to move one step from that room and the cooker on the table. Rational thinking is for the healthy and comfortable, not for the active addict in withdrawal. I chose the sharpest needle from a handful of used works in a dirty coffee can. After rinsing it with tap water, I drew the speedball through the cotton and shot up.

I'd like to say that that day in 1986 was the last time that scenario played out, but off and on for a few months I used works that were not properly cleaned. A year later, when I got sober, I felt lucky that I got out alive.

In 1989, I ran into Carl, my last running buddy. He looked sick. He said to me, "Lillian, remember those people on Norfolk Street we used to get off with? They're all dead, and I'm sick with AIDS. You gotta get tested."

Two weeks later I saw Carl again, and he cried with relief when I lied and told him my test was negative.

Yes, I got caught. And it took years before I could advocate for myself, let alone for the rights of HIV positive dope fiends. In recovery the last thing I wanted to think about was IV-drug users in the HIV community—because they were self-destructive, self-centered, disinterested and unmotivated and because if I did, I'd feel compelled to help them out. It was all just too big, and they were just like me.

Five years ago, when I joined the Women's Treatment Project at New York City's PWA Health Group, Sally Cooper, its then-executive director, kick-started me on a path of HIV activism. The experience taught me a few things, just as my life as a dope fiend gave me skills I would not have otherwise. So you tell me: Now that I'm sober, does it stand to reason that I'd let the HIV community treat me like a leper?

Answers? Write to me care of POZ, or e-mail me at lilliant@prescript.com.

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