Live To Tell: With Conviction

An ex-jailbird and her classmates make the grade in HIV 101

April 1, 2004 By Josh Sparber

Who: Trisha Green
What: Graduation Day
Where: Philadelphia
When: 12.18.03

Once an inmate, now a classmate: Trisha Green, 39, along with 20 formerly incarcerated HIVers, graduated from a program to educate the recently released about their virus—Philadelphia FIGHT's Project TEACH Outside (Treatment Education Activists Combating HIV) (see "Getting Out Alive"). Now volunteering at Philly's Coalition for Prison Health Care, Green's helping reform a system she once found inescapable.

I've been in and out of the system since I was 16. As an addict, I did what I had to do to get high. I was first diagnosed in '92, while living on the street. Whenever I'd land in jail, I'd keep my status secret. Once I heard what people on the block said about positive inmates, I always refused treatment.

When I was last released in 1998, I started using again. So had most of the people I later met in the TEACH Outside class. Eventually they wound up in drug programs, which helped them find transitional housing. The coalition I'm involved with is trying to get prisons to set up programs so ex-prisoners don't have to go back to the streets.

My partner and I met in recovery four years ago. He disclosed to me first, which was good, because I don't think I would have disclosed until we'd had sex. We took the TEACH class together. I intended to gather information about HIV for recently released prisoners but ended up learning more about myself. By the end of the class, my gratitude level really went up—I didn't realize how many recently released prisoners had been through so much.

On graduation day, each person received a diploma and said something about their experience in the class. Three-fourths of my classmates said this was the first thing they had ever accomplished. When you're caught in the system, you end up going right back into it. And that's what I'm trying to help prevent. I know it's a hard task, but by participating in TEACH and the coalition, at least I know I'm trying.

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