Living Will

Linda Loughin finds life after death

April 1, 1997 By Shelley Nohowel

Upstairs and down, the Loughin household exhibits all the happy chaos of a scene straight out of *Roseanne*. Quirky kids, tight budgets and big dreams of getting out of a rented "twin" in Southwest Philadelphia and into a kinder, gentler place. Chas, the cat, is sleeping in a chair that has become the dining-room scratching post. Son Nathan has hung yesterday's jeans smack in the middle of the big street-front window. The family dog, Zephyr, nuzzles me playfully as I sit down to listen to Linda Loughin's story. Beginning with death and coming around to life, it is anything but ordinary.

"The moment I learned I had HIV, I stopped dreaming," says 33-year-old Loughin, who was diagnosed in 1987. The mother of two children, she was hooked on heroin and in a physically abusive relationship with her second husband, a cocaine addict. "I was terrified of AIDS and decided I'd rather die high."

Tracing countless attempts at recovery and frustrating relapses during the following five years, Loughin says, "It got to be real old. I'd hit every bottom I could hit. Dealing, stealing, even prostitution. I was facing charges that could land me 48 years in prison." Scariest of all, Loughin recalls, was ultimately realizing she wasn't dying.

"I'd planned my funeral, made out my will, made provisions for my children. But I was still healthy. It occurred to me that I might live, and then: 'Shit, what am I going to do now? How do I unprepare to die?'" During more than a month in rehab, another several months in a halfway house and two years without her children, Loughin came to terms with having a future. Beginning again meant allowing herself to dream. "But only short, small dreams," she says. "It took me a long time to be OK with death. I wasn't sure how to be OK with life."

Since 1993, Loughin has taken hold of the hope that, in her lifetime, she may see AIDS become a chronic and manageable disease. She spends her days "living, working and volunteering HIV" as a peer counselor for Family Community Service of Delaware County, and as a pre- and post-test counselor, lecturer, educator and board member for Delaware County AIDS Network. Says Loughin, "When you're an uninfected social worker, you simply can't say to someone, 'I can relate to what you're going through.'" She works part-time for her third husband, soul mate and best friend, Jack, who owns a cleaning and maintenance company. She's a good mother. She's taking

college courses. “I have to believe that if I do the footwork, God is going to carry me through the rest.”

Among the myriad inspirational messages tacked to the walls of Loughin’s home, her favorite is, “The only difference between stumbling blocks and stepping stones is the way we use them.” Slowly, Loughin is allowing her dreams to get a bit bigger. “I hope maybe someday we’ll own a horse farm. We’ll listen to crickets at night instead of fire engines. We’ll have grandchildren.” She’s spent her entire adult life learning there’s no quick fix, and continues to work through the grief, the guilt and several lifetimes of tough love.

Loughin’s first and second husbands died from drug overdoses within two weeks of each other last summer. “I got through that. I was there for my kids. Today I’m happy. I’m healthy. I’ve made my apologies to my son and daughter, and I know they’re proud of me. Jack and I laugh all the time. If I never had another friend it wouldn’t matter. You know, death isn’t certain, and I’m not giving up before the miracle happens.”

As Loughin heads for the kitchen to bake cupcakes for daughter Lisa’s class party tomorrow, she leaves me with a rather pleasant irony: “I think HIV has made me the best I’ve ever been.”

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Living-Will-1714-9300