Love’s Recovery

Rusti Miller-Hill gains momentum

January 1, 1999 By Belinda Filippelli

Nothing seems to stay still around Rusti Miller-Hill. When I call her with a follow-up question about her three-year-old son, Brandon, she begins to describe to me again what a blessing he has been. Then she tells me to hold on. “Be quiet!” she tells him. “And pull your pants back on!” She returns to our conversation and says, in the same breath, “Really, he has changed my life.”

Miller-Hill, 36, shocked the people in her life by deciding to have Brandon. The first doctors she spoke to were against it. After all, she was an ex-addict with HIV, and already had a grown daughter. “But I did my own research,” she says, “and went into Albert Einstein’s [a Bronx hospital] immunology program for women with HIV.” With the group’s help, and the rock-steady support of her husband, Kevin, Miller-Hill armed herself with the info needed to plan for her baby and their future together.

“It’s important for women to know that there is life after HIV -- that you can still have a baby,” she says. “HIV doesn’t mean I stop being a woman and stop loving.”

Looking at Rusti now, it’s hard to imagine the person she describes herself as being six years ago, when she was full-time addict. Things reached a breaking point when, just out after a year of treatment for crack, she relapsed and her daughter, Brandi, saw her drugging for the first time.

“I’d been out on the streets for three days,” she recalls. “I hadn’t washed, changed clothes or combed my hair. I had on sneakers two sizes too big for me. Brandi told me, ’Don’t come back until you bring my mother back.’” Miller-Hill falls silent, then says, “I just went out and drugged some more. Why not? I had my excuse. My daughter didn’t love me no more.”

Not too long after, Miller-Hill was arrested for possession of crack with intent to sell, and was sentenced to three years in jail. “It was the out I needed from a situation I didn’t have the strength to walk away from,” she says. “God gives me everything I ask for, and I begged him for help. I just had to be more specific.”

There was a real change in Miller-Hill behind bars, but when released, she was faced with some grim reminders of her previous self. “My mother took me to every place that I’d ever drugged at, and asked me if I wanted to go back,” she says. “The same people I’d left were still standing on the corner. I was afraid to walk the streets for fear that I wasn’t strong enough.”

But Miller-Hill was set on a new life. “My new independence felt so good. I liked the person I became.” She devoted herself to AIDS advocacy and eventually won an appointment to the mayor’s HIV Health and Human Services Planning Council of New York City, also serving as co-chair of the council’s PWA Advisory Group. Today, Miller-Hill is the housing entitlement specialist for the nonprofit Momentum AIDS Services. “I do this work,” she says, “because when I was coming around, there were very few women who would openly share their lives and status.”

Six years clean, Miller-Hill says she spreads the word to other women to accept what they cannot change and change what they can. Each day, she tells them, is a new challenge and new chance to beat the odds. “I remind myself that I’m always just a step away from being a crackhead again,” she says simply. “Not to get high is a conscious choice I make every day.”

Now it’s almost dinnertime and Miller-Hill has to get a steak ready. Before we hang up, she tells me again how much her family’s support means to her. Brandi, who recently gave her mother a grandson, Jarelle, and Kevin were completely involved in Brandon’s prenatal care. Kevin is HIV negative, and Miller-Hill thinks it’s sometimes even harder for him than it is for her. When she gets sick, she says, she can see the fear in his eyes. But, she tells me one last time, when she asks God for things, He delivers.

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