NYPD Blue

Steve Yurcik was a good kid from Queens who scored a blue uniform and a beautiful wife. But fate had something else in store.

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A guy in Steve Yurcik's Midtown South Manhattan precinct once tried to kill himself. When he got out of the hospital and returned to duty, some fellow cops welcomed him back by taping razor blades all over his locker and winding a noose around it. It's no surprise that Yurcik (pronounced *yer-chick*) had major doubts about letting his colleagues know he had HIV.

"Cops can be ignorant, and they can be relentless pranksters. I feared that tremendously," says Yurcik, a tall, blue-eyed man with smooth skin and a beefy mustache: a thinner, urban version of the Brawny paper-towel guy. We're driving around Kew Gardens on a tour of the diverse middle-class neighborhood in Queens where Yurcik grew up, the middle of five children in a tight-knit Roman Catholic family, and where he still lives. "Really I live in this truck," he says, patting the dash of his Chevy Tahoe as we pass The Holy Child of Jesus Church and School, which Yurcik, his brother and his two daughters attended. One of his earliest memories is going to the library a few blocks away and picking up a book about how to be a police officer. "It's the only thing I ever wanted to do," he says.

Yurcik knew police work would never make him rich, but it was a solid career that would give him the power to do right by people. In 1984, at 21, along with a crew of his buddies from Kew Gardens, he entered New York City's police academy. "I ate it up," he says. "I was proud of the uniform. I always felt like if you looked sharp, it showed you had your shit together."

Yurcik's oldest friend, Frank Favilla, was in good with a big shot in the powerful Police Benevolent Association (PBA), and that helped them both to land assignments in "the Hollywood of beats," Midtown South, which encompasses Grand Central, Penn Station, Times Square and the Port Authority. "I figured, 'Why should I work in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant getting shot at when I could be a gentleman cop in Midtown? Who do you meet in Bed Stuy? Not Trump or movie stars or anyone important,'" Yurcik says, waving his arms emphatically. "It was amazing back then. One minute you'd be on 42nd Street dealing with some scumbag pusher, the next you'd be called over to Schubert Alley to help a multimillionaire who'd had a heart attack." As a foot patrolman with alternating day and night shifts, the gregarious Yurcik was in his element, keeping tabs on anyone and everyone. As his buddy Favilla puts it, "He can talk a buzzard off a shitwagon. That's great for a foot patrolman—and now it helps him with the doctors—but it's annoying when you're trying to

get moving."

Yurcik duly climbed the blue ladder, getting promoted first to a radio patrol car and then to a plainclothes anticrime unit—a precinct version of the New York Police Department's Street Crimes Unit currently under attack for what is widely viewed as brutality toward people of color. It was everything he'd hoped: a means of access to the haves and a way to help the have-nots. "You watch the Grammys and Joe Q. Citizen can't get past the line, but you can—you're the fucking police!" he says. "It wasn't all about that, though. The biggest thing my parents taught me was to treat people with respect—even if they're destitute and filthy. I always tried to look out for other people." And not only Yurcik's personality but his professional record reflects this. The sole complaint issued against him in 12 years on the force was by a civilian who claimed Yurcik told him to go fuck himself when he reported a stabbing. On the day of the alleged incident, Yurcik wasn't even in New York City.

Everyone who knows him, from the woman who runs the local coffee shop to his nurse at Long Island's North Shore University Hospital, comments on this positivity, and truly it's hard to miss: He grieves his losses, crying openly and often, but he exudes a basic acceptance of the hand he's been dealt. The worst you can say about him is that he's too eager to please, a bit of a ham. At our first meeting, he asks if I'd like to see a picture of his "pride and joy," and stealing a joke better left to Henny Youngman, he pulls from his wallet pictures of the detergent and the dishwashing liquid.

In fact, Yurcik is so disarmingly nice, it's difficult to imagine him doing some of the less pretty work of the police. "Sometimes you'd have to use force," he says. "Sometimes you'd have to hurt somebody. And you'd stop and think, 'What the hell am I doing?' But then you'd remember it's us against them, it's your job, and hey, this is a paramilitary organization."

Yet things got more complicated for Yurcik once he tested positive in 1990, especially at ACT UP demos when he found himself at once an undercover cop and a frustrated PWA—both "us" and "them." "It upset me to take people in from ACT UP rallies, but it was my job," he recalls. "A lot of times they'd get violent or throw paint all over a squad car when they were fighting for drugs or funds, and I've never seen anything good come of that. We got sick in whatever way for whatever reason—why is that the government's or drug companies' responsibility?" Yurcik doesn't pause for an answer. "Without ACT UP, a lot of things wouldn't have gotten done, but I think more has been accomplished by people doing things in a professional, responsible way."

It's through this lens of professionalism that he views the city's recent rash of alleged police brutality under "law and order" mayor Rudolph Giuliani: "It used to be that the most powerful weapon a cop had was discretion, but that's been taken away. There's so much pressure coming from City Hall to make arrests and have zero tolerance." Yurcik bristles at the suggestion that the four officers who shot Haitian immigrant Amadou Diallo in February are guilty of murder. "From what I know, I probably would have done the same thing. You can't yell, 'Police, don't move!' in a hundred languages, you can only yell it in English. If this was a real training issue, it would happen

more often, I mean we have 40,000 cops in New York City—some countries don't have armies that big!"

Yurcik is too much a believer in the righteousness of the police force to even consider racism as an explanation for the killing. "Do you think for one minute those four cops said, 'Hey, let's go out and shoot a black guy today'? I'd love to take Susan Sarandon and the rest of the people blaming those cops and put them through the academy, have 'Protect yourself' drilled into their heads, let them experience the pressure to make arrests and then see how they'd hold up on the job. They don't realize how many cops are in it to help people."

One person Yurcik tried to help was Linda Donnely, his next-door neighbor in Kew Gardens. Linda was four years older and, growing up, he'd always gotten her hand-me-down Lee Rider jeans. She had married a guy from the neighborhood and had a daughter, Jaime. But her husband was getting into trouble with drugs and petty crime—and he was beating her. When she left him, Linda was pretty much on her own with her little girl. "She asked me what I thought she should do," Yurcik recalls. "I says, 'We can make you into a $50,000-a-year secretary for the police department. You gotta think about your daughter and what the hell you're gonna be able to provide for her.' She said I was crazy, but I got her the application, and I took her to the annual precinct dinner. We had a dynamite time with Frankie [Favilla] and his fiancée. That was it. We got her into the academy, and then I made some phone calls and got her into my precinct." They were married in Hawaii on February 29, 1988. When they got back, the Yurciks had a reception at Russo's on the Bay in Howard Beachin Queens. "They had a pig on a spit like it was a Hawaiian luau," Favilla recalls. "Linda had on a pink strapless dress—she looked outstanding. They were just a beautiful, perfect couple and, let me tell you, they were in love."

But it wasn't long before strange things started happening with Linda's health—she was tired all the time, losing weight and suffering seizures during which she'd lose her ability to speak clearly. The doctors diagnosed her with encephalitis, an inflammation of the brain. Around the same time, her ex-husband started showing up around the neighborhood. Yurcik was not about to let anything upset his newfound domestic bliss, so he decided to file for a protection order. "I go with Frankie to see [Linda's ex-husband's] parole officer," Yurcik says, "and he tells me, 'Oh, you got nothing to worry about.' I says, 'Is he locked up again?' The guy says, 'No. Nothing like that. But he'll be dead soon—he's got that AIDS virus.'"

Linda's doctor told them not to worry, but they decided to get tested, just in case. "We went to a clinic and my wife started crying," he says. "We're looking around and everybody else in there was a mess, a junkie or whatever. They were all staring at us because we looked like we had NYPD stamped across our foreheads." Linda's test came back positive. Lab tests measured her CD4 cells as high, and the doctors told her she didn't need to take AZT. "We were in denial," Yurcik says. "We went to see another doctor who said, 'That's ridiculous—you're a healthy straight woman, there's no way you got that disease.' When you're in a situation like that, you're looking for any way out."

Yurcik remembers seeing former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop on television a few nights later,

talking about the possibility of a false positive if a woman is tested while pregnant. “I thought, ‘That’s it,’” Yurcik says. “‘That’s our fucking ticket out of this thing.’”

The next day the gynecologist told the Yurciks that Linda was indeed pregnant. On Thanksgiving Day 1989, during a snowfall, Stephanie was born. Later she tested negative. Steve was ecstatic. The AIDS panic passed.

Linda’s older daughter, Jaime, now 19 and a striking aqua-eyed blonde like her mother, remembers the year after Stephanie’s birth as the happiest of her life. “It was hard to share my mom with Steve at first,” she say. “After my sister was born, we finally had a normal, storybook life.” But Linda’s health was still off. She had blackouts and trouble swallowing. “We were uneducated—we didn’t know what this disease was about and we didn’t want to believe we had it,” Yurcik recalls. “But something inside told me not to let it go.” When they went to a doctor, Yurcik sat in the waiting room thinking, “This is going to be the most fucked up day of my life—I can feel it.” Linda was diagnosed with a bad case of thrush. She took a second HIV antibody test, which came out positive. So did Steve’s.

Until that moment, AIDS had been as remote to the Yurciks as it was to most of the NYPD. “The only people we ever knew who had AIDS were the guys who would crawl out of their rooms around Times Square to make trouble,” says Detective Arthur Cadigan, sitting in an interrogation room in the Midtown South precinct on West 35th Street, where he worked in a plain-clothes unit with Yurcik. A handwritten sign hanging on the wall reads: All prisoners must be cuffed in this room. (to the eyebolts!) “Back then, the situation in the department as far as AIDS awareness went was pretty horrible,” says Don Jirak, who used to work with Yurcik and is now president of the Gay Officers Action League (GOAL). “The way cops encountered AIDS was through IV drug abusers and gay men, and both classes of people were pretty foreign to most cops. We were in denial that it affected anybody but those people—we didn’t know how to deal so we dealt by never talking about it.”

The Yurciks followed suit and told their parents and only one person in the department, Frank Favilla. “I couldn’t believe it,” Favilla says now, through tears. “I was thickheaded. I thought it was impossible that a friend of mine could have it. This was *their* disease, not ours—that’s how stupid I was.” Steve’s family was supportive if devastated, but Linda’s refused to accept it. “To this day they’ll tell people their daughter died of cancer,” Jaime tells me in her car one afternoon, finding a little privacy from her grandparents’ three-generation household. “My mother died in October 1992, right when I was filling out my college applications,” she says, sticking her gum on the gear shift and taking out a Marlboro Light. “After she died, I became hard-core. I acted tough. I don’t want to say that people were afraid of me, because that sounds like bragging, but….” Today, Jaime is definitely a force to be reckoned with, overwhelmingly self-possessed and competent. “I never relied on my family for support,” she says. “I felt like they would have broken if I did.”

Driving down Queens Boulevard, we pass a man who has fashioned for himself an enormous pair of wings and a headdress of American flags. He stands on the median flapping and waving his arms; traffic slows as drivers gawk and honk. Jaime manages the slightest sideways glance. “After

my mother died, Steve and I were at each other's throats. For a while my mother's parents were living with us because their house burned down, and it was just a lot to deal with," she says matter-of-factly. "He would wake me up at four in the morning when he had night sweats, and I just felt like I had to run the house. I didn't apply to any schools in New York." Jaime ended up at Pennsylvania's Lehigh University; she says she plans to become a pediatrician.

A year and a half after his diagnosis, Yurcik decided to stop hiding—in stages. First he told the PBA, his union, in order to help his wife obtain a transfer to a less taxing position. Worried that he might be shot in the line of duty, he then told the two beat cops he was partnered with. But he refrained from telling anyone else until his wife was nearly in a coma. When he finally told his colleagues, he got the last thing he expected at the precinct: support. "I was scared, I mean I totally anticipated having 'Homo' and things like that written on my locker," Yurcik says. "They were shocked because of how close we were, but people reacted like I was a member of their own family. Absolutely no one shunned me. To this day it just amazes me." He smiles. "I mean, we would kid and joke about it sometimes, but nothing too bad or harsh, just to break the tension."

"We loved Chickie—that's what we called him—and we had exciting times," says Detective Cadigan. "Midtown in the mid-'80s was the height of the crack epidemic—all the theaters in Times Square were still open. Now it's all cleaned up—Disney's here and Mickey Mouse is the new sheriff in town, but back then the shit used to fall from the sky," he says. "We used to dress up as telephone operators to do observation around Port Authority. He was one of us. He was a good man and a good cop and everybody wanted to help him." Two years after he disclosed and his last week at work, some of the guys took up a collection for Yurcik and put together a "10-13" party—the code for "Officer needs assistance." The year after his wife died, several of Yurcik's fellow officers did New York's AIDS Walk, donating the money they raised in memory of Linda.

"Steve was one of the first cops to be public in the force," says GOAL's Don Jirak. "It was a big deal because cops were skeptical about transmission, and whether you wanted to work with a cop who had AIDS was a big question." But any fears NYPDers had about contact with Yurcik were never revealed to him. "You gotta understand, when you do life-and-death work with someone, you may not like them, but you gotta be there for each other," Yurcik says. "The only other person I knew of in the department who had AIDS at that time was one gay officer. Guys would hassle him, but it was more about his lifestyle than the disease." In the end, Yurcik just fit in too well to be rejected. "I only encountered problems once or twice," he says. "After a while I couldn't work the streets anymore because I had peripheral neuropathy, and I didn't want to see anyone else get hurt because of my weakness." So Yurcik was made station-house officer, a desk job. One administrative sergeant in the precinct was always "busting my shoes, telling me, 'You gotta do this paperwork' or 'You gotta file this,' and I was like, 'Do you know what's going on with me?' But he didn't care. I told the other guys about it, and they beat him up at a bar one night."

In addition to receiving the devotion of his comrades, Yurcik was, for the most part, supported by department policy. He was put in "special medical district," meaning he was exempted from the home visits to which officers who call in sick frequently are subjected; he also had a single nurse assigned to his case. "I said to her, 'I can't be the only one on the job with this, there must be

other people. Get me in touch with them.' For nine or 10 months I was telling her, 'Please give out my number so I can start a support group!'" She was hesitant, but finally complied. According to GOAL's Jirak, "The NYPD medical department didn't have a clear-cut policy about what they'd do if you told them you had AIDS, which prevented cops from coming out about it. They didn't know what would happen and were worried about confidentiality."

Yurcik founded a support group, Positive Police, with Sgt. Jack Lamb in 1993, but eventually their partnership failed. "We had some differences in the way we viewed the department," he says flatly. "I felt more like he wanted to fight the department than work with them—his attitude was, the job doesn't care. But when I asked for help, I got it. The group was something I really believed in and I was not going to pursue it if it was going to be a thorn in the side of the department. This had to be something that helps people. So I had to pull away from something I had helped to start." Around the same time, a number of the group's 10 members were getting sick or dying.

Life as a cop with AIDS was taking its toll. After a decade spent patrolling the mean streets, Yurcik was stuck at a bleak desk pushing paper; his break with the department came abruptly after a series of run-ins with a medical high-up. "I had to go see the police surgeon about getting a month off so I could go through a desensitization process with Bactrim," he says. "I brought a letter from my doctor explaining the situation and how this was imperative for my health. But the police surgeon accused me of going to some letter-writer, and he said my whole situation with ridiculous. I expected ignorance from other cops, and I never got it. But here's a man with a medical degree who keeps hassling me. So I finally just said, 'Fuck you and the NYPD,' and that was the day I filled out the papers for retirement." Yurcik never looked back. "My life is not the NYPD," he says vehemently. "It's my two girls."

Yurcik and 9-year-old Stephanie have since moved back in with his parents, to the house where he grew up. His room is not unlike a teenage boy's: phone, bed, TV—and vitamins and meds. Stephanie, a sweet, playful child, watches unflinchingly as he pierces the skin of his arm with a syringe of T20, an experimental fusion inhibitor. "To give him a shot you need alcohol pads," she says. "Then you have to mix the medicine and put the shot upside down, and then comes the injection." Her delivery is nonchalant—the same tone she uses to describe her extensive Beanie Baby collection: "They ain't even valuable without the tags on."

Yurcik has tried every antiretroviral combination out there, to no avail. "A lot of the drugs have no effect on him, and everything else he's allergic to," says Marsha Epstein, his doctor at North Shore. Yurcik stopped taking medication for nine months because he was suffering from neuropathy and other side effects while his CD4 count remained frighteningly low—around 20—and his viral load frighteningly high. "I remember a night the year after my mother died, hearing him crying and banging around," Jaime recalls. "I found him dumping all his AZT down the toilet. He'd had it." Last fall, Yurcik entered the T20 clinical trial at New York University Hospital. The initial results were wildly promising; his viral load dropped—from the millions down to 7,000. Unfortunately, it has since started climbing again. "I think it's his amazingly positive attitude that keeps him going, despite his numbers," says Epstein.

Now the cop-turned-advocate's days are organized around his family, his health care and his AIDS education efforts. He rarely turns down a speaking invitation, and appears several times a week at churches, synagogues, schools and police stations throughout New York. "AIDS can happen to anybody. I mean, I was a police officer. I was Teflon, and I got it," he tells his audiences. "I am a white middle-class guy, I never stuck a needle in my arm, I never had a homosexual relationship, and I got it." With Sgt. Jim Androskowitz, he is relaunching the disbanded Positive Police. He has also found time for a new romance with a woman, Pat, whom he met during a recent hospital stay. "My husband passed away a year and a half ago, and Steve was always calling to help out," she tells me. "His attitude is unbelievable. With his numbers, he shouldn't even be here today, but he's just a happy man despite all that's happened. He truly makes me believe that everything is going to be OK."

Somehow, Yurcik has convinced not only Pat but both of his daughters and, most amazingly, himself that everything is going to be OK. Despite numbers that he has been told add up to an imminent death sentence, he feels not only hopeful but blessed. "I figure I've gotten a lot of what I wanted in this life—love, kids, being a cop," he says one day as we root around in his parents garage, which he has transformed into a work studio for various projects. He excavates a mammoth bag filled with easily a thousand empty jars and bottles.

"This is one year's worth of pill bottles," Yurcik says. "I bring this with me to all of my lectures." He passes it over, but it is too big for me to get my arms around. All of the plastic containers that held months of potential and pain clatter as Yurcik takes back the bag, shakes it in the air like a toy and laughs.

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