Takin’ It to the Streets

Prostitutes find a real gem in Ruby

August 1, 1998 By Donald Suggs

Six feet tall, with a mane of wavy black hair, 41-year-old New Yorker Ruby Amagwula is a striking presence, even in her bohemian Chelsea neighborhood. Amagwula may live among the gallery crowd—she’s a three-year resident of the local Flemister House, a handsome red-brick building that looks more like a luxury condo than a housing facility for people with AIDS—but she spends her evenings on far meaner streets. As a peer educator for From Our Streets with Dignity (FROST’D), a New York City–based organization that does HIV prevention with sex workers, Amagwula reaches out to women on the city’s toughest prostitution strolls. It’s a safe-sex crusade she takes personally. She herself walked the strip for nearly 25 years.

“There are so many girls out there who are lost and alone,” she says in a faint North Carolina drawl. “This is my way of giving back.” And FROST’D gives her ample opportunity to do so. Of the estimated 3,000 women the agency serves, the majority are homeless, addicted to drugs and at high risk for infection (or reinfection) with HIV. Many are also in abusive relationships with pimps or other men.

But while most outreach workers can only offer condoms, information and referrals, Amagwula comes fully equipped with a working knowledge of what keeps women on the streets. “I remember those cold, rainy nights when I didn’t have a doorway to duck into,” she says. “But every time I tried to start over and get clean, I had to go back out there and be with people who were trying to take me in the wrong direction.”

Of her years living in a Harlem crackhouse, Amagwula says, “I had no formal education and no training. I felt like I was better off there.” She credits her AIDS diagnosis, seven years ago, with getting her off cocaine—and ultimately saving her life. “I was dying from drugs, not the disease,” she says. “If I hadn’t been diagnosed, I wouldn’t have gotten into recovery and I’d be dead now.” Though she sought help for her addiction, Amagwula didn’t give up prostitution completely until two and a half years ago.

Because she knows from experience that sex workers may not always be ready to get off the streets, Amagwula’s philosophy is to meet them at their level—no matter how low they’ve sunk. “The only time you look down on a sister,” she says, “is when you’re trying to help her up.”

That requires a dual approach. Amagwula tries to reach women before they become infected. “If they really want a hit of crack or whatever, usually they forget about everything else,” she says. “We teach them to put their health and safety first.” For women who have already been diagnosed, she serves as an example that recovery can help them salvage a life for themselves, even with HIV. “Since I’ve been clean and sober, I haven’t been sick or hospitalized,” says Amagwula, who in 1991 hit bottom at 87 pounds. At that point, she says, “no hospital would even take me in.”

Eventually, though, one did, and she immediately started taking AZT. Later she went on an AZT/d4T/ ddI combination. Her CD4 count rose remarkably, from 10 to 492. “I think it’s my positive attitude,” she says. (But by May, after her viral load crept back up to over 10,000, Amagwula was debating whether to start a new regimen.)

Now, Amagwula is working toward her bachelor’s degree in psychology at the New York City branch of the College of New Rochelle. Instead of a pimp, she has a partner in life, a 37-year-old musician who has been by her side throughout her recovery. “He loved me while I learned to love myself,” Amagwula says.

These days, she still gets all dressed up to work the streets. “Buying clothes and getting my hair done is my other addiction,” Amagwula laughs. But with one big difference. “Now, when I go out on the stroll, I’m giving the other girls hope,” she says. “They see me out there looking and feeling good, and they know there’s hope for them too.”

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