The Roles to Recovery

Chronic caregiver Irma Torres finally learns to care for herself

April 1, 1996 By Dee Mosbacher

Lesbians don't get AIDS -- at least that's what Irma Torres thought until a nurse in her native Puerto Rico coldly told her "You just tested positive."

And that was that. No counseling, no advice. "Everything in front of me went dark," Torres remembers. "I was there, but I wasn't listening to the guy speaking. All I could see was my life in fast review." She left the hospital without so much as a tear. That day, she shoved the pain and fear of dying deep into a place she now refers to as "denial." It wasn't until a day before this interview that Irma Torres -- now, at 37, a peer outreach worker and educator -- would have the opportunity to "feel the sadness and accept the diagnosis." Understanding that, however, requires retracing Torres' seven-year journey battling drugs and HIV. Mired in a cocaine and heroin dependency, Torres, the only member of her family ever to attend college, lost her lover, all of her friends, her job with the telephone company and even her car. Once perceived as the family caregiver, she was forced to move back home -- with HIV making her the family leper. "I had to watch my mother buying bottles of bleach, plastic forks, plastic plates, everything," Torres says. "I asked my mother, 'What are these? Are you going to open a restaurant?' She said, 'No, it's so I won't have to do the dishes.' But every time I went to the bathroom, she used to go and clean up after me with bleach. Then one day I heard her praying, 'God, take her away from me. I don't want to see her like that anymore.'"

Torres realized she was no longer a strength for anyone, least of all for herself. "I was losing weight, I could hardly sleep. I looked into the mirror and said, 'I don't want to die like this. This is not me.'" To survive, she knew she needed to get treatment. Regrettably, the services Torres required as an HIV positive lesbian in recovery were simply nonexistent in Puerto Rico. "I needed to be someplace where I could get better treatment. That's when I made the decision to move to San Francisco."

There she found Lyon Martin Women's Health Services, a health clinic with a broad spectrum of services, including ones that directly assist the lesbian community. Finally in a solid recovery program, Torres returned to school for an advanced degree in addiction studies at the West Coast Institute.

Once again her role began to shift. Employees of Lyon Martin rapidly noticed Torres' natural ability

to guide others in similar circumstances. When an opportunity arose for a community position at the clinic, Torres was encouraged to apply. Her experience was immediately appreciated. Selena Green, Lyon Martin's outreach director, says, "Irma's impact as an out, HIV positive lesbian in recovery was enormous. She immediately connected with these women in a way few of us can."

With a confidence she hasn't felt in years, Torres acknowledges that her own struggle gives her an intimate edge when helping other PWAs in recovery. "I see a big change in those women's attitudes when I'm able to tell them, 'Hey, I've been positive for 10 years and I have accomplished a lot of things in my life.' It makes a difference to a client when you're a provider who can say, 'If I can do it, you can do it.'"

And while Torres had returned to her familiar role of helping others, the one thing she still had yet to do was face the pain she'd been harboring since the day of her own diagnosis. It was time to turn the tables once more.

The day before we sat down to talk, at a crowded training for pre- and post-HIV test counseling, Torres was asked to depart from her usual job as shoulder-to-lean-on and role-play someone on the receiving end of a positive test result. As she sat down to receive her diagnosis. "There was a huge emptiness in my stomach.

I felt a lot of anxiety. I completely forgot about the rest of the people in the room," Torres says. "I received my results and began to cry. I finally had the opportunity to accept and process my fears about death."

"I had been dealing with it every day of my life and I knew that people with HIV die. But it is not the same to know it as it is to accept it."

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