POZ Stories: Tammy Bellish

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In her youth, Tammy Bellish was an injection drug user and addict. When she got arrested in 1989, she volunteered to be tested for HIV. A few weeks later, a rep from the health department came to her home with the results. “It was like my life was a big plate glass window and someone took a shotgun and blew it out,” she recalls. “I was left with a bazillion pieces lying at my feet, and, like Humpty Dumpty, it could never be put back together the way it was. So I decided to construct a new life—a better life.”

By any measure, the Struthers, Ohio, resident more than succeeded. “Today I am married to my soul mate and raising two of my seven grandchildren. My husband is negative. He was my teenage sweetheart, and we ran into each other after 22 years. We do everything any other couple does—we just do it safely.

“Life is good,” she continues. “Though this may sound weird, HIV saved my life! If it wasn’t for being diagnosed, I would have kept living in my addiction and been dead anyway.”

Bellish, who is 58 and started treatment in the 2000s, says she hasn’t experienced HIV-related illnesses or aging issues—“I realize how blessed I am for that!”—though she has been discriminated against. “Fear and misunderstanding make people withdraw,” she says. “I’m open about my diagnosis because people need to see that it isn’t the end.”

Indeed, she just finished her master’s degree in social work, and she’s ready to keep going. “My goal is to get in the HIV, mental health and substance abuse field,” she says. “I’m struggling because of my employment record, but all things are possible! I’ve already faced the hardest issues and survived, so no biggie!”

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