



Rising From the Ashes

Kimberly Nail turned her mess into a message.

November 11, 2024 By Kimberly Nail

Growing up in the '90s, I remember the "Just Say No" antidrug campaign and the fried egg commercials that said, "This is your brain on drugs." When I was in seventh grade, my dad went into treatment for drug addiction. I attended Al-Anon, NA and AA meetings with him. I knew of the dangers of using drugs and the risk of addiction. But at age 21, I quickly became a binge drinker and, for a short period, a blackout drunk.

In November 2014, my Nana, who helped raise me, suffered several massive strokes and was unconscious in the hospital. I had never really lost anyone close to me before and didn't want to feel that pain. I thought meth might lift me up.

From the first hit, I felt invincible. When my parents let me know that Nana had passed away, I didn't want to be a part of reality anymore, so I checked out.

My meth use started as a weekend hobby, then quickly turned into a 24/7 habit. On New Year's Eve, I met a new guy, and we became involved. He was shooting meth, and I wanted to try it. I completely abandoned all my drug education, as well as my common sense, for a guy, a drug and a needle.

At the end of February, I went to the local health department to get my birth control renewed. I didn't hide the fact that I was using needles for meth, so they suggested an HIV test. A few weeks later, I received a phone call asking me to go to the local health unit to discuss my test results. I was told I was HIV positive. I was in shock and total disbelief.

After my diagnosis, I stopped using needles but continued to use meth. I started dating another loser who became verbally and physically abusive. During a visit to his brother's house, he began yelling at me, and I couldn't take it anymore. I took a big kitchen knife and all my medications to the bathroom and shut the door. I thought that I had no other way out.

I took four anxiety pills, five sleeping pills and 20 blood pressure pills. If that didn't work, I had the knife.

He eventually found me and took me to my family and dumped me out of the car with my belongings. I collapsed as soon as I walked into my parents' house, and they called 911.

At the hospital, my blood pressure was dangerously low. My skin was cold and gray, my eyes were fixed, I was dying. The doctors told my parents that they had done all they could and to prepare to say their goodbyes.

I was in a coma for two days. On September 25, 2015, I woke up. I had hit my rock bottom. While looking for a Christian rehab, I came across The Dorcas House, where I took classes on domestic violence and the 12 steps. I also got baptized.

I've been living with HIV for nine years and clean from meth for over eight years. My mess has turned into a message.

As a community health worker with the nonprofit Engaging Arkansas Communities, I educate people about HIV, stigma, prevention and other sexually transmitted infections. I try to deliver a diagnosis with compassion and empathy and spread awareness that HIV is manageable. I am living proof of God's miracles and am currently undetectable, making it impossible for me to transmit HIV through sex. This is known as U=U, or Undetectable = Untransmittable. In 2021, I gave birth to an HIV-negative son.

What is your greatest regret?

Regrets keep people from moving forward. I don't really have regrets, just lessons learned for the future.

What keeps you up at night?

Being HIV positive is not a crime. Science has improved the quality of life for those living with HIV, but the laws are outdated, prejudiced and stigmatizing.

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