Success Through Perseverance

Hepatitis C advocate Peter McLoyd transformed his bad times into good ones.

June 5, 2017 By Tim Murphy

Sometimes life gets really bad before it gets really good. That's definitely been the trajectory of Peter McLoyd, 64, the consumer development and advocacy coordinator at Chicago's Ruth M. Rothstein CORE Center, which treats HIV, hepatitis C virus (HCV) and other infectious diseases.

Today, the soft-spoken McLoyd, who still talks with a trace of the drawl he picked up during his Mississippi boyhood, is HIV-suppressed, addiction-free, hep C–free, married to a wonderful woman and employed in a job he loves.

"I'm extremely grateful that I'm still here," he says.

But McLoyd traveled a long, hard road to get to where he is now. His story starts when, as a young boy, he migrated with his parents and four siblings from rural Mississippi to Chicago, partly so that McLoyd, who had rheumatic fever, could get better treatment. "Chicago was just as segregated as the South, but the overall atmosphere was not as hostile," he recalls.

Once he reached high school, he developed a passion for sports—and heroin. He began injecting the drug during his senior year and continued using on and off for the next several years, even as he became a steelworker, got married at 21 and had two kids. The marriage lasted five years, ending in part because of his drug use. "I have a great relationship with my kids now," he says, "but I'll be the first to admit I was not the father I wanted to be."

In 1978, while being treated for a workplace hand injury, McLoyd was told that he had what was then called "non-A, non-B" hepatitis. Doctors told him that with time it would pass and sent him off with orders not to drink but no guidance on sexual transmission. But McLoyd kept drinking and doing drugs, eventually losing his steel job and going into catering. He gave up using for a while but eventually relapsed, sank deeper into addiction and started "boosting" (shoplifting) to support his by-then $100-a-day habit.

Then, around 1995, he started getting night sweats, soaking his sheets. He ended up in the emergency room for thrush, a fungal infection of the mouth and throat, and a doctor told him that he might have HIV. However, McLoyd wasn't offered an on-site test for the virus.

In 1996, while sitting in county jail after being arrested, he started to think about longtime-using

friends who had died in their 30s and 40s.

“I told myself, ‘You probably have HIV,’” he recalls. But he’d also read a Time magazine story about new HIV meds that were keeping people alive. So when he was released from jail in early 1997, the first thing he did was get an HIV test. Sure enough, he was positive. He also had AIDS and was so sick from it that he was hospitalized.

And that’s when his big life change occurred. He was referred to Chicago’s HIV services drug counseling program, where he had a Black male peer counselor, a former user who “looked like me,” McLoyd says. “He was someone I could relate to. I got clean, cold turkey, no methadone.” (He’s been drug-free since then, and his HIV is well-treated.) Soon enough, he became a peer counselor himself. Right around that time, the CORE Center opened. McLoyd started working there and has been at CORE ever since.

“A combination of peer counseling, 12-step meetings and some very serious counseling with a psychologist” is what McLoyd credits for enabling his dramatic turnaround at this point in his life.

Unfortunately, this was also when he found out that his non-A, non-B hepatitis was in fact hep C, which was discovered in 1989. What’s more, his liver labs were looking bad. So in 2004, he went on interferon plus ribavirin, the old-school hep C treatment. “It was hell,” he says, recalling the medication’s side effects. “Like living with AIDS again—fatigue, insomnia, headaches.” Worse, after a full year’s treatment, he did not clear his HCV.

He was devastated. But once again, his life was about to take an incredible turn. A woman named Kathy Jacobs walked into CORE for a nursing interview. Not only did she get the job, but also that year, she and McLoyd ended up traveling to Africa on an HIV medical mission. McLoyd said he’d never seen anyone work so hard to help others.

“I told her she needed to take a break, and she said, ‘If you’re not going to help, you better go sit down somewhere!’” he laughs.

That clinched it. He was smitten. From Africa, he sent her a long letter professing his love. Back at work, she gave him what McLoyd remembers as “a look of horror.” A few days later, though, she emailed him, inviting him to dinner at her place. “We need to talk,” she wrote.

And thus began what led to their marriage later that year and the life they now share, with their respective kids and grandkids blended into one family. She now works at Chicago’s LGBT-serving Howard Brown Health.

Still, McLoyd had hep C. He was excited when the new hep C med Sovaldi came out in 2015, and he was one of the first to go on it. That drug finally did the trick for many people, but after a year of treatment, it did not clear McLoyd’s hep C. “I couldn’t believe it,” he says. “I was so depressed.” Thankfully, his wife stood by him through it all, often giving up weekends to care for him and, on top of that, helping him mourn the unexpected death of his grandson.

In March 2015, he started a yearlong course of another new drug, Harvoni plus ribavirin. That third regimen was the charm: He cleared his hep C once and for all.

It’s been pretty smooth sailing since then—except for that flight to Miami with his wife to catch a Caribbean cruise. When the plane landed, its engine exploded, starting a huge fire. No one was burned, fortunately, but passengers had to evacuate via the plane’s wing. In the process, McLoyd injured his foot, for which he is still in a medical boot. As for his wife, “She was walking back toward the plane to help people!” he laughs.

Then there are the more humdrum health issues. He struggles with cirrhosis of the liver, high blood pressure and cholesterol. “I try to avoid fatty meat and eat healthy,” he says. He doesn’t drink. He’s trying to kick the six cigarettes a day he still smokes. And once the boot is off, he’ll get back to exercising.

Meanwhile, he’s got advice for others with a recent hep C diagnosis: “Get into care. Most doctors will recommend you get treated ASAP, and you should, because today’s meds are easily tolerated. We’ve come a long way.”

And so has McLoyd, transforming bad times into good ones by finally reaching out for help and being open to it when it presented itself in its various forms, like peer counseling and falling in love. “Surround yourself with supportive people and continue to educate yourself,” he advises. “Don’t allow yourself to be stigmatized.”

So what’s on his bucket list? To retire somewhere warm, likely the Carolinas, with his wife. “And,” he laughs, “to do that cruise that was interrupted!”

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