Watch These Compelling, Hopeful Stories of Substance Users and HIV

A 13-minute mini-documentary on substance use and 14 short profiles are part of the National AIDS Memorial's Surviving Voices initiative.

September 3, 2021 By Trent Straube

"For me, HIV and addiction are inextricably linked," says Billy Lemon in the mini-documentary Substance Users, the Recovery Community & AIDS. He should know. He has dealt with addiction and is living with HIV; he's also the executive director of Castro Country Club, a clean and sober gathering place in San Francisco.

Lemon is one of several people who share their personal stories and expertise in the short film. Thirteen other individuals relate their experiences in a collection of video profiles about drug use and HIV. Among these is Raymond, who was born in Macao, a region of China, but was living in California when, high on crystal meth, he caused an accident that killed a friend. There's also Hazel Betsey, a Black lesbian who tested HIV positive in 1990, after her illness was previously overlooked because folks didn't think lesbians were at risk for the virus.

Those are just a few of the details from their riveting tales of substance use, HIV and recovery. You'll want to hear their entire stories—their video profiles are embedded in this article—and then you'll want to watch the unique stories of everyone else in this series. The profiles and the documentary (which is posted at the top of this article and on AIDSMemorial.org) are also available for viewing on YouTube.

Substance Users, the Recovery Community & AIDS is the latest documentary from the National AIDS Memorial's Surviving Voices initiative, an oral history project that ensures that the stories and lessons of the epidemic are recorded and preserved for future generations. The ongoing project spans years and focuses on different populations. The newest videos were recorded in 2020. Past efforts highlighted the unique HIV-related challenges among the transgender community, women, the Asian and Pacific Islander communities, people with hemophilia and the San Francisco leather community.

How are HIV and addiction linked? A press release by the National AIDS Memorial explains:

> Substance Users, the Recovery Community & AIDS focuses the camera on the unique challenges of HIV/AIDS faced by this community. Through personal stories of survival, the film powerfully captures the journey of AIDS advocates and those of individual survivors living with HIV/AIDS who have struggled simultaneously with the disease of addiction, in raw, honest and forthright conversations. It depicts their individual strength, power, hope and resilience, the importance of community, spirit, self-respect, and the will to live with dignity and pride. It also shows their vulnerabilities, the shame, denial, stigma, and hopelessness they have experienced.

The stories also offer hope, inspiration and education. The series includes an interview with Paula Lum, MD, MPH, who specializes in HIV, addiction and addiction medicine at Ward 86 at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital. She offers context for why people use drugs—including tobacco and alcohol—when people lose control and how they recover. (Her video is posted below.)

In the mini-documentary, Ro Giuliano, a harm reductionist, offers this insight: “What’s most deadly for people who use drugs is shame, stigma and isolation. And what’s needed is the opposite: connection, compassion, open heartedness and understanding.”

The storytellers in these videos offer exactly what’s needed, not just for people affected by drug use and HIV but for all of us, everywhere.

In related news, the AIDS Memorial Quilt—all 50,000 panels—moved from Atlanta to San Francisco last year when the National AIDS Memorial took over as its caretaker. Also in 2020, the National AIDS Memorial launched a storytelling web platform titled 2020/40 that collects stories from four decades of HIV. For more details, see “Watch 40 Years of Personal Stories From the AIDS Epidemic.” For a POZ interview with National AIDS Memorial executive director John Cunningham, see “Healing Through Remembrance.” Last spring, he penned an opinion piece about adapting the lessons of AIDS to fight COVID-19 titled “Through Darkness, We Must Always See the Light.”

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