

NURSE

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In this issue..

⌘ NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

⌘ LEARNING TO LIVE

⌘ LIVE LIKE YOU WERE
DYING

⌘ BIG FAT LIE

The future depends on what we do in the present.
- Mahatma Gandhi

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Summer is in the air and with it a promise of new beginning. In this edition of +Nurse you have an opportunity to read a very personal account of a nurse that is not only HIV+, but also battles daily to overcome drug addiction. I was deeply moved by Jaymes' story when I read it, and hope that you too will appreciate the way in which he opens up his life to you as readers. I have done very little editing to his story as I believe it is important that you hear "his perspective". Keep in mind that we all "journey" – where you are in your "journey" today is exactly where you should be – do not judge yourself or another because of where it is you stand today. Be grateful that you "stand" – and if you have stumbled and fallen – ask for the help of another – too often we deny our friends a "blessing" by not allowing them to help us.

This edition of +Nurse offers you two very unique perspectives – the personal account of an HIV+ nurse and a poignant poem written by a health care professional who cares for HIV+ patients. Listen to the words – I know your heart will be deeply moved.

David J. Sterken MN, CNS, CPNP
Editor, +Nurse

Learning To "Live"

A Nurse's Personal Account with HIV & Drug Addiction

It was four years ago when I began this chapter in my less-than-simple life. It started with the separation from my partner of eleven years. The relationship had become tumultuous at best. Two years of attempts to repair the damage and salvage the relationship ended in his persuading me to take a substance—crystal methamphetamine (CMA), to which I became addicted. During the past two years, I have struggled with the use and abuse of this chemical, and have finally come to what is the close of a very long and emotionally devastating part of my life.

I am an RN. I have struggled with the issues of being a nurse and using an illegal substance. I do not get high from this substance – if anything, I become more mellow, focused, and productive in ways that I had never been before. One of the allures of the drugs was that I was seemingly more productive, and often times, more stable, while under the influence of CMA. This idea seems obscure to many. However, amphetamines focus my brain, not fracture it, and bring me to a level of calm that I had never known before. Yes, if I used too much, I was wired and could not sleep, but I was still able to focus and lay down to rest when I needed to.

I did get stuck in what many have called the "Vortex" – meaning I would sit in front of my computer for hours surfing for sex. I also noticed that the genre of people I began "socialize" with did not partake in life other than to perpetuate their use of CMA – "Tina," "the girl," "the bitch," and assorted other slang names for this drug.

After my initial encounter with what I call "the girl," I would transiently use her for sexual encounters. I found sex more interesting and provocative when using CMA. I did not see that my transient use was becoming more and more regular, or that I was participating in high risk and potentially dangerous behavior. Not until I was diagnosed with HIV, I begin to use in a way that most would consider destructive.

I knew when I became "ill" in September 2004 that something was definitely wrong. I woke on a Monday morning with a fever. I was housesitting for a co-worker and did not know where she kept the thermometer, so I just camped out on the couch for several days waiting for the "flu" to pass. The initial symptoms subsided in about a week, but I continued to spike a

fever of 100-102F for upward of six weeks. Night sweats began to plague my sleep.

I decided to wait until between Christmas and New Years to be tested. On January 13, 2005, I found out I was HIV positive. During the next three months, I was in a self destruct mode. I did not sleep. My "use" of CMA became "abuse." I would travel to Boston three to five times a week for sex, drugs, or both. I didn't care about anything. I called off work if I was not in any shape to go. I was squeezing every nanosecond of living that I could out of life...well, what I thought was "living."

The road I was on took a sharp turn when I heard a song by Tim McGraw entitled, "Live Like You Were Dying." This song proved a great inspiration to me. As life would have it during this same time, I received another very special message. My dear Aunt Bette Jean, with whom I felt connected on a spiritual level, was dying from cancer with brain metastasis. She and I were not close geographically or even on a communal level, but it was our "connection" that drew me to her at this critical point in my life. I went to see her. She and I had never talked about what was going on in my life. Despite her dementia, she looked me in the eye and said, "Jaymes - all this around you will pass one day. Look at the wall there," pointing to the sharps container in her hospital room. "You see all the needles and infection - you are not going to have to worry about HIV Jaymes, you are going to be okay." She hugged me and told me to start singing again, to "reach out with my voice."

That night at dinner I told my mother and her sister that I am HIV positive. Aunt Bette Jean died shortly after our visit, and I knew it was time to stop trying to die and begin to "live like I was dying'." I began to sing again. I attempted skydiving and loved it but I abruptly ended that mode of creative living with a fall that fractured my back in two vertebra, caused internal bleeding and fractured my sternum. Prior to the accident I had not "used" for three months, but the boredom and confinement of bedrest opened the door once again to use of CMA. I told myself that my use was more "controlled," if that is possible, and believe it was a rouse to justify my drug use.

In July of 2005, my CD4 count began a rapid decent and my viral load began to rise. Over one five-week period, my CD4 count went from 680 to 352, and my viral load from 150,000 to 305,000 and I am still not on any HIV medications. A genotype was done that

showed at least four mutations and one of them was already resistant. Although the test results were not definitive, it appeared that I might have what was called a "super infection." My heart sank and my methamphetamine use increased as I tried to forget, but soon I found my emotions unwieldy.

At this point, I realized how physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually damaging my habit had become. I began to limit my use, tapering off in an effort to give my body a chance to rebuild my dopamine and norepinephrine stores. I allowed my body to rest, since the CMA had robbed me of much needed sleep. I sought out social situations and people who would provide positive role models and reinforce healthy behaviors. I walked three to five times per week. I continued my physical therapy to strengthen the damage due to my back injury. I am also singing again - in fact, I sang for the first time in public, something I had not done for 15 years. I even did it a Capella and received a standing ovation.

All the hard work has paid off – my CD4 count has increased 150 points bringing it to the 500 mark and my viral load has dropped to 105,000. HIV has been a curse and a blessing. I am learning about acceptance – not just of myself but all walks of life, honoring the path of each man and woman. No human being is exempt from this disease. Yes, there are some at greater risk due to behavior, but I do not believe that behavior is the sole risk factor.

So many of us exhibit behavior out of pain, past experience, the influence of substances, sexual additions. All of these can lead to behavior that can influence someone to unsafe practices that can increase one's risk of exposure to HIV infection. As nurses, people look to us as the Good Samaritan. Most don't know the co-dependence that ravages the lives of many nurses. The inability to feel whole without taking care of someone else's needs. The loneliness of just being me.

I hope that in reading this I can prevent someone else from repeating my mistakes. If I can impact the life of just one person, then the vulnerability with which I pen these words will be worth it. My decision to remain "clean" is a conscious decision that I make every day and it has been a decision that has proven to promote overall health in my life.

by Jaymes

Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

John 14:27

Live Like You Were Dying

He said I was in my early forties
With a lot of life before me
When a moment came that stopped
me on a dime
And I spent most of the next days
Looking at the x-rays
And talking 'bout the options, talking
'bout sweet time
And I asked him when it sank in
That this might really be the end
How's it hit ya' when you get that
kind of news
Man, what'd you do (he said)
C H O R U S
I went sky diving I went rocky
mountain climbing
I went two point seven seconds on a
bull named Fumanchu
And I loved deeper and I spoke sweeter
And I gave forgiveness I'd been denying
And he said one day I hope you get a
chance
To live like you were dying
He said I was finally the husband
That most the time I wasn't
And I became a friend a friend would
like to have
And all 'a sudden going fishin'
Wasn't such an imposition
And I went three times that year I lost
my dad
And I finally read the good book
And I took a good long hard look
At what I'd do if I could do it all
again...and then
C H O R U S
Like tomorrow was a gift
And you've got eternity to think of what
you did with it
What you did with it...what did I do with it
C H O R U S

Live Like You Were Dying, Written by Tim Nichols
and Craig Wiseman, Vocals by Tim McGraw, from
the album of the same name
Release date August 2004

Big Fat Lie!

What?!

The test must be a mistake!
No, I'm a good girl. I took the test last
year,
It was negative then.
I haven't been with other men.
It must be a mistake!
Oh God! I have a terrible headache.
He took the test.
He's negative, he wouldn't lie..
Oh God , oh please, I want to die!
This is just too much!
I can't, I won't believe it.
Voo doo, a bad trick, anything but
logic.
God wouldn't let this happen to me,
And what about this baby?
Oh...I'm so afraid. Will he still love me?
He'll probably leave because of this bad blood,
this
HIV
I'll be all alone and miserable. He
won't want me.
I can't tell my family, my community.
If this is true
No! it can't, It must be a BIG FAT LIE!
OK, Stop!!
You don't have time to deny!
No it's not , it's not a big fat lie.
You've got to get a grip.
Yes, it is horrible
It is unfortunate
But you've got that little one inside of
you!
Get the pills..
Don't worry about how you feel right
now
You count yes you do,
But the baby, the baby the baby counts
too!
time to cry,
And you certainly cannot believe that
this is
A big fat lie!!

by J.Jamile Munajj-Brown

Jamile Munajj-Brown is a women's health nurse
practitioner working with HIV infected women at
the University of Miami OB/GYN research
department. She wrote the poem after caring for
a newly diagnosed pregnant young woman from
Haiti.

***HIV does not
make people
dangerous to
know, so you
can shake their
hands and give
them a hug :
Heaven knows
they need it.***

*Diana, Princess of
Wales*

3538 Ridgewood Rd.
Akron, Ohio 44333-3122

We as a committee would love to hear from you. Do you have ideas for articles? We would welcome anyone who would like to submit an article. Deadline for our next publication date is September 1, 2006. Let us know if you are interested in writing an article.

Please email us at anac@anacnet.org with