Gloria Searson

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New York City, NY

Diagnosed with Hepatitis C 1997

The following is an excerpt from the Hep Winter 2017 Special Issue cover story:

Gloria Searson has never let her circumstances define her. Instead, she has always found a way to turn them into opportunities to help and educate those within her community. That's precisely what she did when she learned she was living with HIV and hepatitis C virus (HCV).

"Hep C scared me more than HIV," explains Searson, 58, an advocate, health care provider and social worker. "They say 30 years is the progression of HCV with no HIV. I've lived almost half my life with both. I had to learn how to do it well or else it would have been a horrible half of my life." Today, she is hep C–free, and her HIV viral load is undetectable.

While in rehab in 1991 for a six-and-a-half-year addiction to crack cocaine, she tested HIV positive. "I think that HIV and that death sentence—as it was considered back then—was my get-woke moment."

Her main priority at the time was remaining drug-free, so she didn't initially address her HIV diagnosis. She also didn't want to discuss her HIV status with anyone because she felt the virus was a by-product of her addiction.

Searson joined the recovery program Narcotics Anonymous (NA) in an effort to overcome her substance dependence. However, about a year into living with HIV, her sponsor told her that NA wasn't really working for her because she hadn't addressed her virus.

"My sponsor challenged me," she recalls. "She said, 'If you don't deal with your HIV, you'll probably relapse in a year or two. It's something that you have to deal with.' She also felt like I was someone who could do something about being HIV positive."

Searson would have to leave her Brooklyn neighborhood to learn how to take care of her HIV and to get accurate information about the virus because "information wasn't funneled into Black communities," which was something her sponsor understood.

That's why Searson's sponsor sent her to Stand Up Harlem—a now-defunct organization that

provided housing to homeless people and people with addictions who were also living with HIV. She credits the organization with helping her turn her life around and accept her status. “It was the first time I had said out loud that I have HIV to another human being,” she says. “From there, I just moved forward.”

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