Happy Camper

Las Vegas resident Stella Armstrong cured her hep C and the joy-killing fatigue and pain that came with it.

June 3, 2019 By Tim Murphy

On Friday evenings during the summer, Stella Armstrong and her husband, Rob, pack up their two dogs, Chewy and Penny, and drive nearly four hours from their Las Vegas home to stunning Bryce Canyon National Park in southern Utah.

There, in their rented RV, they spend the entire weekend surrounded by the park's massive, psychedelic rock formations and eye-popping red hues, drinking in its glorious sunrises and sunsets. It's sheer bliss—and Armstrong, 56, a construction-company bookkeeper, knows it.

"I'm very blessed, grateful and humble," she says about her life today. But it wasn't always this way. For many years, Armstrong lived with untreated hepatitis C virus (HCV), which stealthily advanced in her system and dragged down her quality of life until something had to be done.

The saga starts way back in the late 1970s, when Armstrong—a self-described "military brat" who grew up just about everywhere, from Texas to California to the Philippines—dropped out of high school in San Diego and started hanging out with a fast crowd.

For a short time, she injected drugs. When she became pregnant, she put down the needle, but she continued drinking and using even as she was raising two kids.

"I accept responsibility for my choices," she says. "And I made some bad ones."

That part of her life lasted all the way until 2000. That's when she finally went to court-mandated rehab, where she tested positive for HCV, which she assumes she contracted during her brief needle-using period.

With no money or job, Armstrong accepted the court's offer to live in a sober residence. "That's how I stayed clean," she says. Which isn't to say she did it perfectly. "The hardest thing was staying away from friends who were still using, including my ex-boyfriend." A few times, she tested positive for drugs and once ended up having to spend a week in jail.

"I had to retrain my brain," she says. "And it eventually worked."

The support of her family, including her kids, whom, she says, she "put through some trauma,"

helped her stay off drugs, as did finally acquiring a job, which she credits with giving her great opportunities and making her feel stable.

Also now stable was her liver—for a while. But even after she had kicked drugs, Armstrong continued to drink, which is a concern for people with chronic hepatitis or other liver diseases.

In 2015, labs showed that, after years of relative health, her liver fibrosis, or scarring, had progressed from Stage F1 (relatively little) to Stage F2 and F3 and finally to Stage F4 (cirrhosis, or severe scarring).

Moreover, she was having the classic symptoms of advanced hep C. “I felt like I had the flu every day,” she says. “It took a big effort to get dressed for work. I couldn’t concentrate and was forgetting things. They told me I had to stop drinking then and there.”

And she did. “I’d only drink when we went out, but when we did, I’d drink to excess. So I just made myself stay home. That’s what it took.”

By late 2013, the Food and Drug Administration had approved the first new direct-acting antiviral drug that had been proved to clear HCV at high rates with minimal to no side effects—a leap forward from the decades of meds that came with horrible side effects and uncertain results. Consequently, in April 2016, under the care of Kaiser Permanente in San Diego, where she had lived since young adulthood, Armstrong started hep C treatment with Sovaldi (sofosbuvir) plus the older drug ribavirin.

Her treatment wasn’t entirely without side effects. “I had a little bit of nausea and headaches and a rash and anemia from the ribavirin,” she says. Today, ribavirin is usually no longer needed for hep C treatment.

Two days after she started treatment, her liver labs came back normal. At the 30-day mark, her hep C viral load had reached undetectable. In all, she was on treatment for 12 weeks. Although her side effects lasted a few more months, posttreatment testing out to a year showed she had remained HCV undetectable. She was cleared. A FibroScan showed improvement in her liver health.

Better yet, just a few weeks after starting treatment, she was already feeling better. “My joints weren’t aching, and I had more energy,” she says.

Since then, she has become a hep C treatment advocate, working the tables at local events for the American Liver Foundation and planning to go to Washington, DC, with the group to urge legislators to maintain funding for awareness campaigns about testing and treatment for all who need it as soon after diagnosis as possible.

“Sometimes plans won’t cover you until your disease advances because the treatment is so expensive,” she says. That’s why she also advocates for hep C drugmakers to lower prices, which have been criticized as being among the highest in U.S. health care.

These days, despite no longer having liver issues, Armstrong limits herself to a glass of wine on a few holidays. “It’s just not that big a deal to me anymore,” she says. “I go to bed at 8 p.m., and I feel good!” That means all the more energy for those beloved trips to Bryce Canyon with her husband, whom she met in 2002 and also has been cured of hep C.

She urges everyone, regardless of their history, to get tested for hep C. “So many people still don’t know they have it.” She also urges those who test HCV positive to get on treatment as soon as possible.

“I was taking almost 10 pills a day when I got treated for hep C,” she says. “Now you can take one pill a day for as little as eight weeks. Your symptoms are just going to get worse if it’s not treated. So treat your hep C, and get on with your life!”

As for her own life these days? She’s truly amazed. “My kids, who are everything to me, tell me I need to write a memoir,” she says. “I should probably do it before I start forgetting everything!”

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.hepmag.com/article/happy-camper-stella-armstrong