Patricia Shelton

April 6, 2018 By Tim Murphy

New York City, New York

Diagnosed with Hepatitis 2002

The following is an excerpt from the Hep Summer 2017 issue cover story:

No one would say that Patricia Shelton has it easy. The New York City resident, 64, is living with both hepatitis C virus (HCV) and HIV, financial constraints and a stressful housing situation (the landlord of her Harlem apartment building won't move her to a unit that isn't plagued by earth-shaking noise from the tenant below).

She has survived heroin addiction and the loss of her partner of 25 years. She knows she smokes too much and should exercise more. She gets lonely and depressed.

But at the same time, nothing can stop her from loving life and cracking a one-liner like the hard-boiled dames in the 1940s movies she loves so much. She is also obsessed with the Kennedy family.

"They were our royalty," she exclaims. "I have 10 or more books on the Kennedys. Jack and Jackie. Of course, Ethel was jealous of Jackie." An artful beat. "I just wish we could go back to that time when it comes to the presidency."

She brings that effervescent chattiness and sense of humor along with her to work every day at Settlement Health, a community health center where she has been an HIV/AIDS and hep C peer educator for nearly a decade. On top of that, she's on numerous advisory boards, including those for New York State's AIDS Institute and the Positive Women's Network. And she cuts a stylish figure around town.

"I love to dress up," she says. "I have five pairs of cowboy boots, including snakeskin. Growing up, I didn't want to be a cowgirl—I wanted to be a cowboy."

The setting for that growing-up was Roosevelt, Long Island. "Hometown of Eddie Murphy and Dr. J!" Shelton notes. "I come from a sheltered world: mother, father, brother, sister, dog, house, church, school." When Shelton married young and had three daughters, it seemed she'd be replicating that life. But she did an about-face when she left her husband at 26 and moved with her daughters to Brooklyn.

Eventually, she met Keith, the man who would become her life partner of 25 years. But he also introduced her to heroin. “Before him, I was the one who would ask for grape Kool-Aid at a party,” she laughs. While in detox in 1991, she tested HIV positive. “Right around the same time as Magic Johnson,” she notes. Keith tested positive for HIV as well. “The doctor told us we had two years to live. I told him, ‘I’m going out kicking and screaming.’”

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