Remembering Naomi Judd as a Powerful Voice for Hepatitis Advocacy

Singer Naomi Judd was diagnosed with hepatitis C in 1990 and cured eight years later. She spoke out for those with liver disease.

May 5, 2022 By Trent Straube

As the news spread that country legend Naomi Judd died by suicide April 30, 2022, after a struggle with mental illness, an outpouring of tributes followed (a few are posted below). Many remembrances praised her for using her voice not just to create lasting country music but also to speak out for the millions of Americans who have hepatitis and liver disease.

As a person diagnosed with and then cured of hepatitis C virus (HCV), Judd knew those struggles firsthand. Before attaining fame and winning Grammys in the mid-1980s with daughter Wynonna as the duo the Judds, Naomi Judd (also the mother of actress Ashley Judd) worked as a nurse. During her career as a health care provider, she experienced numerous needlesticks, and it's likely that one of those incidents led to her contracting hepatitis C.

> Called Dad today to express my condolences about Naomi Judd. Some thirty years ago, she had contacted him after hearing of his research on a treatment for hepatitis. She picked him up in her limousine, took him out for dinner, and visited his lab.https://t.co/2nfck6UApl
> — Dawn Eden Goldstein ???????? (@DawnofMercy) May 2, 2022

Hepatitis refers to inflammation of the liver. When untreated, it can lead to scarring of the liver (cirrhosis), liver cancer, the need for a liver transplant and death. Hepatitis can be caused by

several factors, including toxins, excess alcohol use, autoimmune diseases, fat in the liver and viruses, including the three most common ones: hepatitis A, B and C.

Judd wasn't diagnosed until 1990, when she learned that she had been living with the virus for eight years and that it was the source of her severe muscle aches and fatigue. At the time, doctors told he she had three years to live. She retired from the music industry in 1991 because of the illness but eventually returned to the spotlight.

> I have something else to say about Naomi Judd- she used her very large platform to talk about two things that are highly stigmatized in our society, Hepatitis C and severe depression, I'm sure that took a toll on her, and I hope most days she knew how much people loved her pic.twitter.com/aVryKTyUPs
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> — Molly Shah (@MollyOShah) April 30, 2022

"It felt like there was no way out, like being buried alive," she recalled to the Chicago Tribune in 1998, the year she became one of the lucky people with hep C to be cured, thanks to treatment with interferon. Back then, treatments came with brutal side effects and a less than 50% chance of being cured. Thankfully, today's hep C treatments are much easier, shorter and more effective than ever, often requiring only taking a tablet daily for as little as eight weeks. (To learn more, see Hep's Basics section on Hepatitis C Treatment.)

Even while struggling with fatigue and sickness, Judd rallied to raise awareness of the disease, including launching the Naomi Judd Education & Research Fund. "I think catastrophe holds the potential for growth," she told the Tribune. "It's not what happens to you in life; it's more about what you do with it."

> Today we take a moment to remember Naomi Judd and her legacy in changing the way people view hepatitis and liver disease. @acawonk, former ALF Chief

Executive Officer tells how Naomi Judd brought liver disease out of the shadows, https://t.co/aiT5jAb4Ej pic.twitter.com/fWImSrh1in

— American Liver Foundation National (@liverUSA) May 4, 2022

Alan P. Brownstein, a former CEO of the American Liver Foundation (ALF), reflected this week on Judd's advocacy. On LiverFoundation.org, he recalled the nation's view about hepatitis in 1990 and Judd's response to her diagnosis:

> At that time there was an overbearing negative stigma against all people with hepatitis and all liver diseases—it was "their fault." As a result, access to needed specialized treatment was limited and liver disease research was minimal. Clearly, this "blame the victim" societal view of hepatitis had its consequences for the 30 million, men, women and children with liver diseases and over 5 million with hepatitis at that time.…
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> Even though Naomi was ill and fatigued with hepatitis C, she made sure it wasn't all about her. She stepped up big time as the public face for hepatitis C as she became the national spokesperson for ALF spreading awareness and raising money for hepatitis C and all liver diseases. She made a big difference.
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> I know this to be true as I witnessed her persistent public visibility lead to hepatitis and liver disease transitioning from a largely stigmatized and ignored illness to becoming mainstream with congressional research funding increasing more than 300% in just a few years matched by a huge growth in liver specialists. Indeed, Naomi deserves much credit in lifting diseases of the liver out of the shadows.

Although hepatitis C is now curable, it remains a public health threat. It's estimated that 2.4 million Americans were living with chronic hep C between 2013 and 2016 (about 1% of the adult population), according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. What's more, 14,242 people died of hepatitis C in 2019, and acute hep C cases quadrupled from 2009 to 2019. Today's opioid crisis and related injection drug use continue to fuel new cases of hepatitis C.

According to the "Hepatitis C Transmission and Risk," part of Hep's Basics of Hepatitis, hep C is most easily spread through:

- Sharing needles and other equipment (paraphernalia) used to inject drugs
- Blood transfusions and organ transplants before July 1992
- Sexual contact with someone who has hep C
- Having a mother who had hep C when you were born.

For a collection of related articles, click #Hepatitis C. You'll find recent headlines such as "Universal Hepatitis C Screening During Pregnancy Detects More Cases," "Mysterious Hepatitis Outbreak Hitting Kids in U.S. and U.K." and "Pamela Anderson, Who Once Had Hepatitis C, Heads to Broadway [VIDEO]."

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