Sunshine on My Shoulders

Stella Armstrong’s journey to a healthier life wasn’t easy.

June 3, 2019 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Stella Armstrong is very much a happy camper these days. Now cured of hepatitis C virus (HCV), she spends summer weekends with her husband and two dogs enjoying the outdoors.

For a long time, such simple pleasures weren’t on her agenda. When she was HCV positive, Armstrong endured joy-killing fatigue and pain related to living with the virus. Thankfully, all that went away after she started treatment in 2016.

Her journey to a healthier life wasn’t easy. A self-described “military brat,” Armstrong grew up traveling from place to place. For a short time, she injected drugs. She attributes testing HCV positive in 2000 to that period in her life.

Armstrong tested positive for the virus while at court-mandated rehab for her alcohol use. Later, she accepted the court’s offer to live in a sober residence. After a few tries, she eventually stayed sober. Her life has improved ever since then.

Now 56, Armstrong works as a bookkeeper in Las Vegas. She has also become a hep C treatment advocate working local events for the American Liver Foundation. She even plans to go to Washington, DC, to lobby for hep C funding. Click here to read more about her story.

Asking the federal government to take more action against hep C is certainly high on the priority list for advocates. The nationwide opioid crisis has only made such action more urgent. Injection drug use is fueling the hep C epidemic, so prevention efforts are sorely needed.

Needle exchange programs have been shown to help reduce new HCV cases. Taking that idea a step further is the concept of safe injection sites. These are spaces where people can use drugs, clean needles are provided and the staff is trained to respond to overdoses.

Safe injection sites have been started in many countries but not in the United States. Several U.S. locales have proposed opening such sites, but none has yet succeeded in its efforts.

Alex Azar, the secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has publicly expressed support for needle exchanges but also noted that the Trump administration does not support safe injection sites. Click here for more.

The adverse effects of hep C include an increased risk for liver cancer. Treating the virus can mitigate this risk, which is yet another reason to advocate for access to HCV drugs. For those who do develop liver cancer, more options are now available. The Food and Drug Administration has approved three new liver cancer treatments. Click here to read more.

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