Super Friend

As a peer educator, Gloria Guzman inspires others hoping for a hepatitis C cure.

June 6, 2016 By Tim Murphy

Gloria Guzman, a peer educator at the Special Treatment and Research (STAR) Health Center in Brooklyn, knows a thing or two about survival. At 67, she's lived through bad relationships, the loss of a child, addiction, HIV, hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV). Thankfully, she's now cured of hep C.

"I'm an inspiration—don't forget!" exclaims Guzman, who was born in Puerto Rico, grew up in Brooklyn and moved to Los Angeles for a while but eventually returned to New York. "I'm like an older version of Wonder Woman." Helping others get through what she's been through, she says, plus the love she derives from God and from Gigi, her beloved terrier, keeps her on a good path.

But that path used to be rocky. Guzman says she had a good childhood overall, despite growing up during a tough era in Brooklyn, but she still had to watch her mother deal with physical abuse. "I saw a lot of domestic violence," she says. "It had a very emotional effect on my life."

Her first relationship, which led to marriage at 17, didn't last long, but it did produce two daughters, Joyce and Denise, with whom she is close (as she is with the daughter she gave up for adoption, Jennifer, who was fathered by another man).

After that, in 1980, Guzman fell in love with a man she only later learned was using heroin. "He swept me off my feet," she says. "Good-looking like Ben Affleck and a hell of a dancer. I started partying with him." Although that relationship ended, she had a son with him, Ernie, who died in a car accident at age 18.

In 1989, she moved to L.A. and met a new man she calls "O." Also at that time, she says, "I started losing weight and having a lot of diarrhea." Cleaning out his closet, she found a bottle of Hivid (zalcitabine, or ddC), an early HIV medication. She confronted him, and he told her he had HIV—he had not disclosed to her previously. Worried, Guzman took an HIV test, which came back positive.

"I'd never thought of getting tested" prior to that moment, she says. "I didn't know anything about HIV/AIDS. I wasn't part of that community, and I was naive." Guzman believes she contracted HIV sexually from her second partner, the heroin user, but she's not sure because she'd also had a blood transfusion during a pregnancy.

“I loved O, so I tried to stay with him,” says Guzman. But she couldn’t get over his HIV betrayal and left him. Alone, she went into a downward spiral, drinking alcohol and using drugs. “My L.A. house went into foreclosure,” she recalls. Salvation came in the form of a woman she started chatting with at the supermarket who handed her a card for L.A.’s OASIS Clinic, where the woman was a case manager. “I think she was an angel in disguise,” Guzman says.

Guzman started going to the L.A. clinic for regular HIV monitoring treatment, even as she grieved O, whom she lost to AIDS in 1992. Around this time, she also kicked booze and drugs. “I started going to church and seeking spirituality, and overnight I threw out the beer and the crack pipe and the weed. I decided that there was a God up there and asked him to use me as a tool to help someone else.”

Yet amid this upward turn, she also found out she had both hep B and C. “I said, ‘Hep C? What the hell is that?’” Guzman says.

By this point, Guzman had moved back to New York to be near her mother in Brooklyn, where she started going to the STAR Health Center. “I’ve been a patient there ever since,” she says. “They’re my second family. I started going to groups there and taking down notes, learning all the different medications and how they work in our cells. I became known there as ‘Gloria the Professor.’ I’ve been a peer counselor there for years now, three days a week.”

In the mid-2000s, with her HIV well under control, Guzman tried interferon therapy to cure her hep C. “I did six months, and one day I opened up my apartment door and walked out in a very confused state,” she recalls, with horror at the psychological side effects. “I felt like screaming. I ran to my mother. The next day I stopped interferon.”

But she also began harboring hope in an emerging generation of hep C meds. Finally, in early 2015, her physician, Elliot DeHaan, MD, told her she was a good candidate for one of them, Harvoni (ledipasvir/sofosbuvir). “I said, ‘I have nothing to lose—let’s go for it!’” she recalls. “I had some anxiety about being approved for coverage, but it went through. When I got that call, it was like my prayers had been answered.”

And the result once she began? “It was a miracle pill!” she exults. “I didn’t have one side effect, except for feeling a little tired.” Two weeks into treatment, she tested undetectable for hep C. She continued treatment to 24 weeks—and has been cured ever since. “People tell me that I glow now,” she says. “I have a chance to enjoy my life a little bit better.”

One big part of that enjoyment is her peer education work. “Our goal is to get people on hep C treatment,” she says. “I share with them my story of having no side effects, then I call them, remind them of appointments, contact them to take their medicine, tell them not to drink alcohol. I assure them that it’s going to be OK.”

And then there’s Gigi. “She’s part of my healing,” says Guzman. “When I was first told I was hep C undetectable, I took Gigi to Prospect Park [in Brooklyn], got on my phone and called my loved ones and said, ‘I’m here in the park enjoying the weather. Oh, and my doctor told me I’m undetectable!’

My daughter says I’m crazy because I think Gigi is human. And I’m like, No, I’m well aware that she’s a dog. I just love her that much!”

As for others with hep C considering treatment, Guzman has inspiring words: “Close your eyes and imagine the doctor telling you your liver is hep C–free. Just grab that moment and hold on to it.”

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