Helping Others After Hep C

Nate Rush waited to treat his hepatitis until highly effective and easy-to-take treatment emerged.

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In the late 1990s, Nate Rush was diagnosed with hepatitis C, a virus that slowly damages the liver, but he didn't want to use the treatments available at the time. Rush, 67, knew from friends who, like him, were in recovery from injection drug use (a main form of hep C transmission) that those treatments did not guarantee a cure. He also knew that the side effects—flu-like symptoms often accompanied by debilitating depression and exhaustion—were usually unbearable. "I saw those side effects in my own friends," he says.

Instead, given that Rush not only had hepatitis C virus (HCV) but also cirrhosis, which is chronic liver damage, he did what he could otherwise. Mainly, he cut fatty fried foods from his diet and replaced them as much as possible with lean protein like baked fish and chicken and plenty of water, fruits and vegetables. He had stopped using alcohol and drugs in 1991, which spared his liver further damage. So he bided his time until better HCV treatments came along.

By that point, Rush had been in recovery nearly a decade and had learned to make smart choices—a process that came slowly. Born in Indianapolis in the mid-'50s, he came of age in the hippie era, "experimenting with weed and LSD and listening to Jimi Hendrix and heavy jazz," he recalls. Soon, he was snorting heroin; when that didn't get him high, he began injecting it with his friends and sharing needles. He went on that way for over 20 years, with only brief breaks when he was in the Army or in prison on petty theft charges. "I went to a methadone clinic for about eight months, but I didn't really like it, so I went back to shooting dope," he says.

Finally, his mother, fed up, sent him to detox at the Salvation Army, which required him to attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. At one of them, the speaker turned out to be a high school buddy of his. "He said, 'Nate Rush, I'm glad you're alive!' and ran up to me and hugged me," Rush recalls. "Then he told me I needed to go to Narcotics Anonymous, get a sponsor and stay at the Salvation Army—and I did all that and got my life together." Newly sober, he worked his way up at the Salvation Army from a janitor to a counselor. From there, he worked in HIV/AIDS services, eventually becoming the head of Bethlehem House, a recovery facility.

During that time, he also finally decided to get an HIV test. "I'd already made peace with the idea that I had it," as so many of his former injection-drug-using friends did. But surprise—he did not. However, another test found that he had hep C, along with the related cirrhosis.

In the 2010s, the Food and Drug Administration approved a new generation of HCV protease inhibitor drugs that proved to cure hep C in three months or less with, in most cases, few to no side effects. Rush went on a two-drug combination. After eight of his 12 weeks on that combo, lab tests showed he had no hep C viral load. He was cured of HCV.

Rush says he wasn't trepidatious about going on the treatment because "I'd had the privilege of doing leadership training with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, where I learned about evidence-based treatment. So I trusted the science. Plus, I had my network of people who'd already done the treatment, and I trusted their lived experience."

Today, he says, he spends a lot of time convincing other Black folks living with hep C that treatment is not what it used to be. Getting them to believe him is not always easy. "The scientists once tricked us with Tuskegee," he says, referring to the infamous racist Tuskegee experiment from 1932 to 1972 during which white researchers withheld a cure for syphilis from Black men so they could observe the natural progression of the disease.

Rush says he understands how that example and numerous other documented instances of racism in medicine have soured many Black folks on the health care establishment. "Go do the research," he insists. "And find someone who has done the treatment and ask them"—either in person or via various online hep C Facebook groups.

Giving out good information is what Rush has devoted many years to, including in his current job as a part-time counselor for Indy's Recovery Cafe, a drop-in treatment, social and services center for folks experiencing addiction and/or homelessness. He's done much of that work over Zoom in the age of COVID-19, which nearly took his own life recently. He caught the coronavirus in the rehab center his family had put him in due to his growing mobility issues. He wound up on a respirator in a drug-induced coma and was paralyzed for six months.

The road back has been hard, he says, and he finally just started walking again without a walker in the assisted-living facility where he currently resides. "I was one of the very blessed ones who came out of COVID alive," he says.

He's also happy to report that, likely due to the combo of the hep C cure and a healthy diet, his cirrhosis has not been advancing. And despite his challenges, he says there's joy in his life—from his daughter, who is an art teacher at his old high school; his four grandkids, who call him "PawPaw"; and his goddaughter, whose high school graduation he hopes to attend in Phoenix this May. He also loves getting massages, attending 12-step meetings and watching football. "We've got great running backs and good defense," he says of his hometown team, the Colts, "but our quarterback sucks!"

Now, Rush says, his No. 1 source of joy is the fact that "I went from being almost dead to where I am now. I feel extremely blessed that I get to do more things with my life and continue to serve people." And that includes continuing to get the word out in the Black community and beyond about the importance of getting tested for hep C and being open to the new treatments for the virus if one tests positive.

“There’s so much misinformation out there, but hep C treatment works,” he says. “It saved my life. If you need it and you’re hesitating, then you’re paying a price that you don’t have to pay.”

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