

Jackie Johnson

July 7, 2017

Bronx, New York

Diagnosed With Hepatitis C in 2010, Coinfected With HIV

As someone who once was living with hepatitis C, I know how nerve-racking and scary the diagnosis can be. I know the thoughts that can run through your head when you receive the news. I know how your stomach can churn thinking about the side effects you're told you'll likely experience due to the medication.

But as someone who has been cured of hepatitis C, I also know the feelings of hope and positivity that most people don't—but should—recognize when they are diagnosed. The worst hepatitis C status is “unknown.” You can now be treated and cured with new medications that are fast-acting and have no serious side effects.

I was first diagnosed with hepatitis C in 2010, when I was 35 years old. At the time, I was living in my hometown of Dallas and worried about how hepatitis C would impact my life as a man also living with HIV. I learned that I had contracted hep C from an unsterile needle that was used when I received a tattoo. Like so many others, I was scared—and for good reason.

In 2010—just seven years ago—there was no cure for hepatitis C. The first medicine that was introduced to cure it didn't have a great success rate, and you were required to inject yourself once a week. Individuals who tried this treatment complained of horrible side effects, many of which left them feeling sick all day.

I was afraid to try this medication because of these reported side effects and my own fear of sticking myself with a needle. I began treatment when a new drug became available, which simply required taking one pill by mouth once a day instead of an injection. I was required to switch my HIV meds to make sure that nothing conflicted with the hepatitis C medication. My doctors carefully monitored me to ensure that both my HIV and hepatitis C were under control; after just six weeks on the new medication, my blood work came back negative for hepatitis C—I was cured! And I experienced no negative side effects while on treatment.

I've been hepatitis C negative for two years and can now reflect back and recognize the people and organizations that supported and guided me. My mother, who has always known every detail of my medical status and history, was a shining light of acceptance through it all. My doctors, whom I always felt I could be honest with, helped keep me calm about both my HIV and hep C

diagnoses.

I've always been a firm believer in trying new things and living life to the fullest. When I decided to leave Dallas and move to New York City to pursue my dreams of an acting career, I had never even visited the city before. Though I knew this was the right choice for me at the time, I was scared to leave behind my family and friends. Luckily, once I got to New York, I quickly found Amida Care (www.amidacareny.org), and it became my new support system in this new city.

As a health insurance provider, Amida Care does everything in its power to assure you that you are not alone. The staff goes above and beyond to ensure you get the best care. They called to make sure I was happy with my doctors, provided various wellness programs to help me meet other members and even found me a psychiatrist at my request. They offer a holistic approach to health, wellness and support—something I so desperately needed as a person living with HIV and hep C in a brand-new city. They connected me with the treatment I needed to be cured of hep C and maintain an undetectable viral load while living with HIV.

Although I've been cured of hepatitis C, it still impacts my life every day. I've lived in New York City for three years now, and I do my best to educate others about hep C, erase existing stigmas and provide support to those living with hep C. I worked as a hepatitis C specialist at Brightpoint Health and worked hands on with people who had been diagnosed but had not yet started treatment. They were able to relate to me, since I had been in their shoes, and I did my best to reassure them and encourage them to get treatment.

I'm currently in the process of going back to school to get my degree in psychology, and I'm still pursuing acting. Though I'm not sure where this journey will take me, one thing is for sure: I'll never stop sharing my story and helping those who have yet to recognize the importance of getting tested and the hope that exists despite a hepatitis C diagnosis.

What three adjectives best describe you?

Kind, dependable, trustworthy.

What is your greatest achievement?

My greatest achievement so far has been getting a promotion to general manager at the fast food chain where I worked in Texas and then taking a chance and moving to New York City.

What is your greatest regret?

I regret staying in a bad relationship for more than four years, but I wouldn't change anything. Even the bad situation taught me about what to do in future relationships. Everything is a learning experience.

What keeps you up at night?

Continuing to make it in NYC—which includes making sure I have a roof over my head.

If you could change one thing about living with viral hepatitis, what would it be?

I wouldn't change anything about my experience living with and ultimately being cured of hep C with help from Amida Care. It's part of who I am, and it's made me the person I am today.

What is the best advice you ever received?

My mom taught me the importance of always working hard and go for my goals. My grandmother, who passed away, advised me not to do any favors for anyone that you don't really want to do them for.

What person in the viral hepatitis community do you most admire?

I don't know many people in the hep community. I'd like for that to change and for there to be more openness. There's almost more stigma around hepatitis C than HIV. I hope sharing my story will help change that.

What drives you to do what you do?

My mom has always had my back, and she keeps me going. Anytime I feel down, I look at pictures of my mom and my two nieces, whom I helped raise, and that reminds me to never give up and keep pushing.

What is your motto?

Treat people how you want to be treated.

If you had to evacuate your house immediately, what is the one thing you would grab on the way out?

My dog, Cinnamon.

If you could be any animal, what would you be? And why?

I would be an eagle. They are strong, fierce, powerful creatures. Their mighty wings allow them to go wherever they want to, and they're protected. They're giants of the sky!