TESTIMONY

LETTER FROM STEW

SAN FRANCISCO–3:30 in the Morning. Can't sleep. Thinking about the past five years, walking the streets of Boston. Keep flashing back to the faces that kept me coming out on the coldest nights...

He was full of energy, holding court on Mass. Ave, entertaining his friends with poetry and William Burroughs' stories when he wasn't walking the route with Kelly and me. He tried to clean himself up when he saw what drugs and the street started doing to his body. I only hope that he did it in time, and we could count him as one of our success stories. Hopefully he'll be alive when he's thirty years old.

We'd do the exchange with about twenty regulars on a good night. Our route was small, but real personal. That kept me going out night after night, getting to know who the people around me were. We'd windowshop the antique stores with the hookers. Walk the streets and trip over the same cracks in the sidewalk every Friday at 7:00. Get to know the shopkeepers and the people who lived in the neighborhood.

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She was so full of life and love. We told each other when it was our birthdays. We'd quickly relate our weekly jaunts around town before someone would scream out a window or a beeping car would hail her off for some very important scam. It would be a week, or maybe a month, before we'd see her again. "Where have you guys been," she'd say, "I've been looking for you for weeks." Kelly and I would roll our eyes knowing that we'd been out here, same time every week for two years, walking the block. "Friday from 7 to 9, look for us."

Before I moved to California I tried calling her to say good bye, but her number was disconnected. I know she's going to have a hard time getting HIV services, being a black woman whose skills include how to live from day to day, not how to work with the Department of Public Health or the AIDS Action Committee. I have a feeling she didn't get in touch with the connections I gave her. She did understand that her environment was affecting her health, and that she needed to slow down.

The nice thing about being from New England is remembering the change of seasons. The smells of autumn. Cool and clear nights around the Fens. One night we were walking near the wall of the Fens, bundled up in our leather jackets, when I first found out that she had tested positive. She was crying and had to tell someone what was going on, that she was also Hepatitis B positive, and what should she do?

We talked and tried to calm her down. I remember sitting on the sidewalk with her and a woman from the University of San Francisco who was doing an epidemiology project on needle exchanges around the country. As they were talking, I was sitting sadly on the side of the gutter, kicking a puddle and bunch of leaves with my Doc Martins, thinking that I'd been out there fighting AIDS, doing needle exchange and condoms, for six years and that another friend of mine has this terrible virus.

God! I can't imagine just working in a bank, doing nothing about AIDS. ▲

- Stewart Goldstein

A real friend walks in when the rest of the world walks out

Working an underground needle exchange route in the Combat Zone is a tricky business.

The need is very great, but there is much fear and mistrust. When Tom, an IV Leaguer, first started a route in the Zone, potential clients suspected he was an undercover cop. Over time, he created bonds of personal trust. Now he is widely respected among the sex workers in the area for being there every week, working to save lives.

Tom's caring doesn't stop when his route is over each week. He is fond of saying, "A real friend walks in when the rest of the world walks out."

A few weeks ago, one of Tom's clients disappeared. He was pretty upset. After asking around, he found out that she'd been arrested and was serving time at MCI-Framingham. Hassles ensued as he struggled with the Dept. of Corrections to be allowed to visit her.

After getting permission for a visit, the hassles seemed worthwhile. Her first words to Tom were, "You saved my life." Her boyfriend is HIV-positive, Tom's clean needles and condoms had kept her from being infected. She kicked heroin while in prison. She is studying psychology and sociology. When she is done with the prison release halfway-house program, she intends to continue working on her recovery and wants to help other addicts and sex workers in street-level AIDS prevention. ▲

- David Stitt

THE COST OF A DIRTY NEEDLE

I am an addict, I use the term addict much in the same way someone afflicted with diabetes would say, "I'm a diabetic". Diabetes is a disease and so is addiction. I began using drugs in high school, for a number of reasons: peer pressure, low self-esteem and constant denial of my homosexuality. I also believe I was born an addict, that I was genetically predisposed to addiction as both my parents are people with obsessive-compulsive disorders. I will not orate about my bad childhood, or the fact that I wasn't breast fed. In short I became a heroin addict, a thief, a liar, and a prostitute; none of which I thought I would become.

There comes a time in everyone's life when we have to take responsibility for our actions, when we have to take responsibility for ourselves and our problems. So, in January of 1988, I desperately wanted out of the life I was living. I called several detox facilities. Unfortunately, the minimum wait to get into a state or federally-funded program (because I had no insurance) was six weeks.

I was put on a waiting list, and as each day passed, I felt I had absolutely no choice but to continue using, stealing, lying, sharing needles, and selling my body because addiction does not wait.

I finally got into a state-funded detox facility in March 1988 where I was encouraged to test for HIV. I was tested and much to my relief, the test came back negative.

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PILOT PROGRAM PASSES

...from Page 3

point for implementing a comprehensive statewide program to fight AIDS, our careful bureaucrats at the DPH are taking a minimalist approach.

People who have been most involved in doing street outreach to IDUs and sex workers in Boston, including ACT UP's IV League (needle exchange) volunteers, are being shunned by the directors of the DPH pilot program discussions.

Don't be surprised if the pilot program's needle exchange component consists of making an appointment with a certain doctor, at a certain hospital room in Cambridge and/or Boston, taking a number, filling out a form... Even worse is the wait and see attitude coming from Gov. Weld and the State House, who appear to be planning yet another in-depth study on the effectiveness of needle exchange before taking any stronger steps.

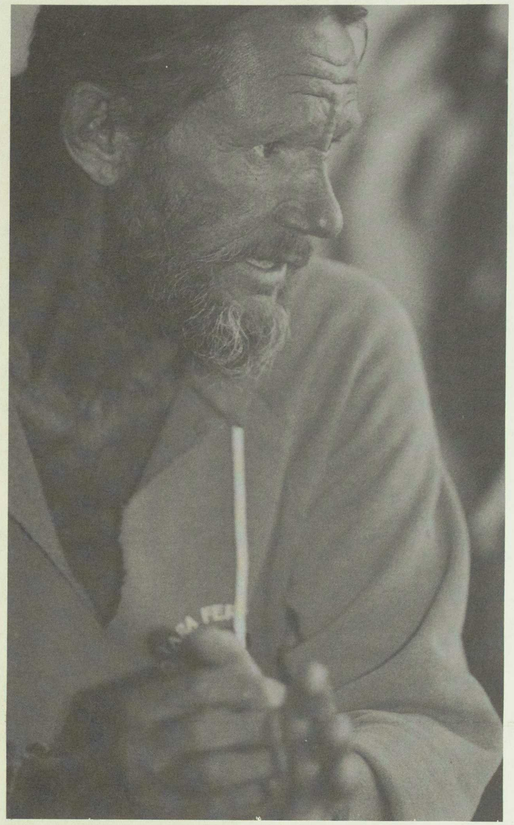
There has been careful study after careful study, in Europe, in Australia, in Canada, and in the U.S., on both the West Coast and the East Cost – even as close as New Haven – all showing that needle exchange saves lives by preventing HIV infection and serving as a bridge to medical care and recovery. Not a single study revealed an increase in illegal drug use.

These programs have been recommended by the Presidential Commission on AIDS and now, at least implicitly, by the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, which stated in its decision against Harry Leno and Bob Ingalls that "the needle exchange is saving the lives of drug users, sexual partners, mostly women, and children who are born of them."

We don't need another study. We don't need another year-long wait while a few thousand more people get infected! To interpret the pilot program legislation as a mandate for only a limited, one-site, off-the-street "experimental" needle exchange is, as a Feb. 5, 1992 Gloucester Times editorial put it, "a nice safe copout and a death sentence for addicts." ▲

- David Stitt

Needle exchange is saving the lives of drug users, sexual partners, mostly women, and children who are born of them.



Marc Faber *Daily Free Press*

Harry Leno is one of the most outstanding and compassionate activists that we have ever had the privelege to work with. In our opinion, the Governor should grant both Harry Leno and Bob Ingalls a full pardon. *- ACT UP/Boston*

"The real political task...is to criticize the working of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked so that one can fight them." - Michel Foucault, 1974

COST OF A NEEDLE

from Page 4...

On March 4, 1989, I reached my one-year anniversary of being drug free. I began to plan for the future, like finishing my college education, but ironically the day after the celebration, the results of my second HIV test came back, this time it was positive.

On December 21, 1990, I received a diagnosis of full-blown AIDS. I estimate that my medical costs have exceeded $500,000, and since I have not been able to work since March of 1990, many of these expenses have been paid for by the state and federal government.

Maybe my story would have a different ending if I had gotten into treatment earlier or if I had had clean needles. Needle exchange is not a panacea, but it is needed to keep people HIV free until they can get into treatment if they choose to do so. I would be remiss if I did not mention that it is my strong belief that I was infected while on that 6-week waiting list to get into treatment.

So here's the choice: a 6-cent needle or a $500,000 medical bill with a shortened life. It sounds simple, doesn't it? ▲

- Keri Duran