

Double Whammy

A young addict learns one hard lesson too many

Being pursued by police at high speed for more than 4 hours was probably not the first sign Denny's life was out of control. The red flags would have been there much earlier—the day he quit his job to sell drugs, gave up his apartment to couch surf, lost his best friend over his drug addiction, and realized that his most important relationship was now with his dealer.

“I guarantee that from the very first hit of crystal meth, all those morals that you think you have, will go — right off the hop,” says Denny, a 29-year-old recovering addict. “That drug will make you do anything. It is the devil. And it will absolutely end up demolishing you.”

Going into day 367 of his recovery from an addiction to crystal methamphetamine, Denny now speaks very soberly about a drug that is known to seize people in a deadly, unshakable grip. From his first hit when barely 21, his life spiraled downward. Once a volunteer firefighter and certified paramedic, Denny turned his back on everything and everybody in a single-minded determination to get high by whatever means necessary, including crime.

Crystal meth is extremely addictive, making users feel very alert, pulsing with energy, and invincible. Many addicts also become very promiscuous and careless in their sexual behaviour, says Denny. “I carried on a gross, nasty habit for a long time; I'm not proud of it and I did a lot of things I regret.”

In 2007, the high-speed car chase landed Denny in jail and gave him a reason to steer clear of drugs, at least while incarcerated. “I was offered drugs in prison,” he says, “but I told myself, ‘You're not going to come back here to this little hole in a concrete room with grey walls’.” And he didn't.

But in the fall of 2007, six months into his sentence, Denny was shocked to learn he was HIV positive. He was placed briefly in isolation to remove the risk of suicide. Once he settled, he was told to contact anyone with whom he had shared a needle or sex in the previous year. “Phoning those people I had emotional ties to was hard. But I didn't want them to get a letter from the Centre for Disease Control telling them they should be checked out for HIV.”

Once released, Denny was referred to an HIV/AIDS program

where he met Bonnie Sydora, one of a team of nurses that provides a range of education and outreach support services to HIV or AIDS victims, especially those in prison. “Bonnie was always there for me when I needed to talk,” says Denny. “She gave me all the information she has about HIV; in turn she asked me about the dis-

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ease of addiction. We've learned from each other.”

Denny attends Narcotics Anonymous meetings several times a week and volunteers as a support and intake worker at Resurrection House, a residential program for recovering addicts. “I try to carry the message of recovery with these guys,” he says. “I love seeing the hope in their eyes when they come through the door.”

His addiction under control, his greatest anguish now is his fear of HIV. Although he has been tempted to “stuff my feelings” with drugs, he's determined to stay clean.

“I am walking the walk and I'm really starting to enjoy it,” says Denny, “and that's because of the strength of the [recovery] house, the feeling of unity, and Bonnie, who has been a really big help to me.”

by Ellen Baragon