

My First Epidemic

Category: Connections

written by Deborah Meltvedt | December 5, 2022

I used to stick needles into veins. I learned how on manikins and co-workers' extended arms of trust. I never took a class. I wasn't a nurse. I was a white middle-class health educator in central valley California teaching farmworkers and homeless men and women about a new epidemic called AIDS. Educators were needed who were comfortable talking about sex and condoms, hope and death, and drawing possibly infected blood.

For a while, I did well. But one September morning, I called in my third client, a teenager named Stormy who claimed she was eighteen. Stormy was rail thin with limp dark hair and a piercing stare. As we sat down, she bragged about quitting heroin and having a boyfriend who quit school so he could find a job. They wanted to get pregnant, so she needed the test, to *give the kid a decent start*. And with her words, my own ones of compassion became ones of safety lectures and self-righteousness, till Stormy said *really lady who the hell do you think you are*.

Then, I missed her vein. Twice. The blue line slipped and disappeared, and I couldn't catch it.

Let me do it, Stormy snapped.

No. I replied. *We can wait for the nurse*.

Stormy again, *Lady, Let Me Do It*.

Still a bit shaky, I gave in. With one hand, Stormy expertly re-wrapped the plastic band around her thin arm, her teeth holding the end, and with her other hand slammed the needle into pale, bruised flesh. Blood oozed into the vial. Triumph spread across Stormy's face.

Come back in two weeks, I told her.

But two weeks passed, and Stormy didn't show.

It would be a month later when I saw her in line at a shelter. I was handing out bleach and condoms and hotlines. I tapped her shoulder.

You didn't come back.

Just tell me.

So I broke protocol again, and told her publicly. *Negative*.

Stormy's eyes softened, and she smiled wide.

Then she hugged me. Saying *thank you* over and over again until we released each other.

Out of that epidemic, health care workers learned to always wear gloves, and partners learned to wear more condoms. I learned judgment never had a place in healing.

In today's epidemic, we wear masks and help people who are sick no matter their background. We connect. Even if just for a moment.

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