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Hometown: Chelsea, MA
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Age: 50



KM: What was your childhood Like?

EL: I was a nerd, the lonely kid on the block, insecure, and I was the one everyone picked on. I was shy and full of fear. The principal of the junior high school allowed me come into school late and leave early through the backdoor because the kids picked on me that bad. They would throw rocks and stuff at me. When I got home, my mom was the type of person who would say, “Don’t do anything about it. Leave it alone.” And because she did nothing about it, she basically taught me to be afraid. My father on the other hand was very abusive. The way he hit us [siblings] would be considered child abuse right now. He was controlling—we could not look out the windows, go out and play with kids on the block. We couldn’t even open the refrigerator to get our own food. We would have to ask permission—it was either yes or no—and, if we went in between like some kids do, we would get a beating. I started drinking around 7 or 8 because

my father thought it was cute. On his anniversary which was NYE, we would stay till midnight and drink a cup of coconut rum, and then we could go to sleep. My father use to beat up on my mother all the time. He was a womanizer, and he cheated on her for 25 years. I am the only boy, four sisters all together.

KM: Would you say that was when your addiction began?

EL: To be honest with you, I remember moments when they would have parties, and I would be nipping at the beers under the table. But I think the coconut rum thing might have been, because after that it just kept going on. Eventually, probably around the age of 15 and because I was the one always being picked on, I wanted to fit, and I wanted to drink decided to smoke pot. Probably by the age of 16, I was already snorting cocaine and doing all the regular pills (Special K, Black Beauties, all which stuff). By the age of 17 to 18, I already had a free basing habit. Around the age of 19, my father threw me out.

KM: Where did you go after you were thrown out?

EL: Couch surfing.

KM: When did you find stability?

EL: There was no stability. My entire teens there was no stability whatsoever until about 15 years ago.

KM: And what happened 15 years ago?

EL: I spent my life in and out of halfway houses. My first program was at the age of 22, and I was so afraid to say I was gay, I was so afraid. And that’s another reason why I drank. I would get on the bus in Chelsea and head to downtown Boston (the Boston Common area) to drink, get high, and have sex because that’s all I knew. Of course, I got into very bad situations. There was this one incident like, I shouldn’t be here. I will always remember it, and my parents don’t know about it to this day. Because of the drugs and going out there and being 16 or 17, I had been raped in an alley way behind one of the clubs. It was something like that where I kind of just sped off.

In between programs and halfway houses, at 22 I found heroin. Luckily, I never injected it—I only snorted it to the point where my nose hurt so bad, I got scared. Between the heroin and cocaine, there were three OD's, and I can only remember passing out and my heart hurting. Eventually, I started playing with my head where I would say, "Okay, I'm going to give up the heroin" but I stayed with the crack/cocaine, and I stayed with the alcohol. I was going to figure it out myself. I never went back to the heroin. Maybe once in a 5 year span I snorted it, but that was it.

What happened 15 years ago was when I did the geographical cure thing, thinking I could leave Boston and get it together. So, I moved out Western Mass—Springfield—where I went into a program and graduated Gandara. Then, I relapsed. They put me in my own apartment right on the spot, drug dealers right out front. After I relapsed, I was in and out of programs throughout Western Mass.

Finally, I found what I call my second home, North Hampton Mass, which I love, and would love for it to be the place where I retire. I went into my final program there. It was called Hairston House. I remember it was a Friday, and when I was there and settled, I had to go to a meeting. I was supposed to go to the meeting as it was part of the house. I was looking through the little book, and I found this LGBT meeting, and I said "I need to be there" but I was scared shit. I weighed 200 lbs., I was insecure about myself, I was fat, and I had no clothes. So, I forced myself to go alone because nobody in the house knew I was gay.

I came out when I was in a Spanish program, my first program when I was 22. I came out in an all Spanish male therapeutic group. When one of the guys asked me to say the word, I couldn't even say the word "gay." I broke down in tears.

I walked to the LGBT meeting full of fear, I was angry and pissed off, and I didn't have anything. I walked into this meeting in a church basement, and this big woman came up to me. She opened her mouth, and the sweetest voice came out as she said welcome. Towards the end of the meeting, there was this big book that went around, and everyone was signing their names. I didn't know what they were doing, but at the end of the meeting they gave me the book and said "make this your home." It became my home, and is still my home to this day. It was this program, 15 years ago, where I truly discovered what AA was.

I have a sponsor who I love to death, and she's a female sponsor because as they say in Gay AA, women with men and men with women, because it's a lesbian and gay thing. But for me, I have a sponsee now who is a straight man, and he knows I'm gay. So, this is what I am saying about the program—you never know who is going to help you, you never know. So, 15 years ago I got clean and sober. I went through hell and all that stuff in my lifetime. I don't know why, but I haven't picked up, and somewhere along the way I lost the desire to use. It's true what they say in the rooms, and it's in the literature— "The obsession will be removed."

KM: How has your life been in recovery?

EL: Full of major changes, I mean I went to school. Three years ago, I graduated college, Bunker Hill Community College, and I got my certificate in Psychology and substance abuse. I've gone through many breakups and relationships. I learned what relationships are supposed to be and what my part is suppose to be in a relationship. My sister who didn't speak to me for twenty something years reached out to me on Facebook, and she talks to me. I spend so much quality time with all my sisters, they are my best friends. No one outside of my family is my best friend—I can say they're friends, but my sisters are my best friends. I am an uncle, my nieces I adore them to death, and my nephews are a pain in the butt. I exercise; I've lost the weight and kept it off. Running is my high. Three days can go by, and I start to feel out of it, and it's because I haven't been running. Usually on days like this [weather was nice] when I get out of work, I'm at Revere Beach running. I have my own apartment, where my rent is paid, I don't have to worry about losing it, I don't have to worry about not being able to pay the rent because I budget better. I have food in my refrigerator when I go shopping. I've gone through ups and downs. I

lost a partner of five years in recovery who really, really taught me what a relationship should be, could be, and shouldn't be. Jose was wonderful. If he was alive, we would have remained good friends.

KM: What about your work in the field?

EL: Off and on, through all my relapses and stuff, I always worked in the field. My first job was coming right out of TC. They offered me a part-time relief staff job, and from there case manager. Then I started working for the Fenway Health Center for a while. But, in between all that, I would resign from my jobs because of the relapses. I wouldn't stay with a job or get fired because I was using. These last 15 years, I've had some pretty great jobs. I was working at Pine Street Inn as peer support specialist.

This job [recovery coach], I love it and I can't say I hate it. I do dislike some things, but I love it. I think treatment should be equal for everybody. I don't think people should be making saving a life a process, and I think Narcan should be given to anybody and everybody regardless of insurance. Working with the patients is amazing. We have some complicated cases, but we accept the challenge. When I came into Charlestown, you know you have your first day jitters and all, and you hear all these rumors like, "You're Puerto Rican, and this is Charlestown," but I didn't let it sit with me because I came here to do a job. I was like, "I am here—get over it!"

The relationships that I have built with so many people here in Charlestown, where I didn't think they were going to accept me, I don't know how it happened. I walk into the health center, and I am just me. I can be flamboyant one minute; I can be butch the next moment; I can be miserable one minute; but, because of the patients, I come out of my shit. It's about them. Part of my job is to relate with them, guide them, break the obstacles that keep them hesitating and fearful of getting help. The patients tell me some really sad stories. There have been three incidents over the past two that have caused me to cry.

We have so much success going on at the health center. I have seen the changes these people have been making. They struggle, they relapse, they come back, but they are engaged. From what I hear, they're more engaged now than before I was working here. What keeps these people engaged is to just be real. I keep them engaged with my approach and with consistency. The two things that I live by, that I try and pass on, are: "Never forget the pain and the misery you went through so you don't have to go back" and, "I don't care what you look like, you smell like, show up. You got to show up for life." If I am preaching it, I am practicing it. There have been days in recovery where I haven't wanted to get out of bed. Life hits us, but nowadays I am a normal guy. Lori [co-worker] asked me, "What is normal?" I told her, this is normal. The life I was living was not normal. The life people are living in active addiction is not normal—it's sad and depressing. When you come out, and you're in recovery—that is what is normal.

I don't ever want that life again.

