


POSITIVELY WOMEN

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2002



looking towards the future

move on up!

what's on at PW

Cate's column

your say



After over 11 years of dedicated work, Leigh is a familiar face at PW and has made an enormous difference to many of our lives. However, like her co-guest editor Carolyn, it is Leigh's time to move on. Here she writes on the creation of her new bright future.

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There was part of me that wanted to leave PW quietly and anonymously, but a few things happened to make me change my mind. One was that this edition of the newsletter happened to be titled 'Looking towards the future'. Then my 18 year old nephew said to me the other day: "Leigh, you should feel proud, you've dedicated over a decade to a really important issue, that's more than a lot of people do". Lastly I would like to acknowledge and say goodbye to so many incredible women that I have met through PW.

I first came into contact with PW in 1991 when they were advertising for the newly developed posts of what are now known as Direct Service Workers. I got the job – this was a massive feat for me, as I didn't think anyone would employ me. I had been a drug user for 20 years, been in prison 3 times and of course I was HIV positive!!!!!!

I was incredibly inspired by the whole concept of the organisation and by the women involved in it and within a couple of years became Services Manager.

The whole experience of working really built my confidence and self esteem and whilst empowering other positive women it became a very empowering time personally. It

was also quite a tough time emotionally. So many people were dying, it got to the point that we'd have to pick and choose funerals.

It was at the funeral of Jaynie (Founder member of PW) that I decided to leave PW for the first time. She had written a letter that was read out at the funeral saying that although she was dying, she was dying happy and it made me think 'well if I die in the next year' – that was how I thought and lived then – 'I couldn't say that I was happy'. I had got so exhausted and burnt out with the work, that with the time I had left I wanted to do something creative.

I've always been very talented. I sew, I embroider and years ago people used to say that I should have done really well. Although I started lots of projects – I never saw them through as I always messed up with the drugs.

So I left PW, did a couple of college courses, but didn't leave the HIV world. I got involved with ICW (The International Community of Women living with HIV and AIDS) as a Trustee and volunteer for 7 years and again this was a wonderful empowering and a learning experience. I met and worked with some wonderful people in different parts of the world.

During this time I came back to PW when they needed help with the drugs and prison work and

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generally in the DST team. I stayed for yet another few years. But I have finally and definitely decided that it's time to make new beginnings, which is very exciting but also quite scary. In a way, although I really believed passionately in PW and ICW and the whole HIV Women's issue, it has also felt very safe and comfortable and therefore hard to let go of.

I realise that it was circumstance that brought me into this field and although that has obviously been part of my development as a person and a massive part of my life journey, I've also known for a long time that this isn't my destiny.

I'm still not sure what is – but it's time to make true choices. For many years a lot of my choices were based on "Well if I only have a couple of years to live, what do I want to do?" And "Well, what can I do? I'm HIV, ex addict, ex prisoner" etc etc. It's time for true choices now based on me as a whole person – time to leave those labels behind.

I'm not sure what I'm going to do – I've started an Embroidery City and Guilds Course which I'm really enjoying and it involves quite a lot of work. The rest of the time I'm just going to concentrate on being creative and see where it leads me.

BY LEIGH

Quite frankly all I'm asking is to find a measure of contentment – but who knows? If I can within a few years go from fixing heroin into my neck to becoming a Manager of a National Charity I guess anything's possible!!!!

Writing this and talking about the early days just makes me quite amazed that I'm still here. In January I shall be 50 years old and will have known that I've been HIV Positive for 16 years. So isn't it wonderful to be sitting here thinking about new beginnings and the future?

As I said, I really would like to take this opportunity to say goodbye to so many wonderful ladies that I have met over the years and wish you all well with your futures and dreams and thank you for being part of my life.

Another thing that has struck me whilst writing this is that I feel really proud saying goodbye to PW, just because it still exists. In this ever-changing HIV world, where so many other organisations have been forced to shut down over the past few years, I think it's pretty amazing that it's still such a strong organisation.

So goodbye, and may Positively Women go from strength to strength. **PW**

An open letter from Maggie Stewart an ex-member of PW's staff who started work the same day as Leigh back in 1991

Dear Leigh and Carolyn,

A fond farewell and good luck on your new adventures.

Do you remember Leigh when we started at PW? Jumping in at the deep end – we gave that phrase a new meaning! But really Leigh, you were great. It was such a serious time in the work we had to do – creating the Client Service Team and the prison and drugs work that you did.

As well as putting in the work, you were always able to keep a sense of humour and let's face it, we needed it in those good old bad days – the days before combination therapy.

And Carolyn, I remember when you arrived at PW as a client. A strong vibrant women with a voice. Your strength of character was refreshing. Like so many other HIV Positive Women who came through PW's doors, you embraced the self-help philosophy and empowerment of PW – at a time when so many women were ill and dying.

Leigh and Carolyn, I feel PW is loosing the last of the old ones – no pun intended!!- but I wish you the very, very best in what you do in the future.

Love Maggie



The many faces of Leigh: Mother Christmas, relaxing with Cathy, PW's ex-editor and working as a Drugs and Prisons Sessional Worker.