

Your Life

Where WE get closer to YOU



Coleen Nolan WHY I'M PROUD MY MATE BEVERLEY HAS SPOKEN OUT P37

Getting HIV saved my life

EXCLUSIVE Chrystal White was taking drugs, selling sex and out of control – but then she got some news she thought would ruin her life. Instead it changed it for the better.
By Amanda Revell Walton



P38&39
BEAUTY
WHAT THE EXPERTS ARE BUYING



P40
DR MIRIAM HANDS OFF ABORTION RIGHTS

We love telly

DON'T MISS
4 PAGES OF TODAY'S TV START ON PAGE 43

It's not something most of us could imagine ever saying, but Chrystal White truly believes that being diagnosed with HIV saved her life.

After sinking into a world of drugs and prostitution as a teenager, she spent years not caring if she lived or died until some terrible news turned her world upside-down – and gave her a reason to go on.

Chrystal had been left blind in one eye after she was glassed by a robber who attacked her when she was buying drugs. But even that wasn't enough to put an end to her life on the streets. It was only when she got HIV that everything changed.

"It may sound strange but the way I look at it, being diagnosed with HIV was a blessing. I honestly think if I hadn't been, I'd be dead from drugs by now," says Chrystal, 26.

When she talks about her "chaotic" childhood, it's easy to see why she ended up with the life she did.

"There wasn't a lot of love in our house – or food. We were always hungry," says Chrystal, who is one of 10 children.

"I remember once eating toothpaste and dry pasta because we were so hungry. We learnt how to shoplift when we were young – sweets, crisps, anything to keep the hunger at bay."

Chrystal's parents split up when she was 12, and she ended up living with her brothers in their dad's flat in the red light district of a Midlands town.

She started smoking, tried alcohol and cannabis and skipped school.

Chrystal made friends with three girls in her year and they started shoplifting. One evening they went out and her pals admitted they were prostitutes.

Chrystal says: "I'd stand on the street with them, but I was too scared to do anything. They tried to get me to do what they were doing, but I wouldn't. I was still a virgin."

But the financial temptation

I stopped caring about my health and how I looked

got the better of her and, eventually, Chrystal started having sex with men for money.

She remembers the first time with a shiver. "I was petrified. The man drove me to his car to a dark country lane and my head was spinning. He was on top of me. He and it hurt."

The man paid her £100. "Afterward I drank and smoked until I'd obliterated my feelings," she says.

Over the next few months Chrystal had sex with her three friends. They had sex with men for money in cars regularly, in alleys and on the sides of buses. As they'd make £200, they'd do it a night.

"Clients knew we were underage but that's what most were looking for," she says.

"I hated what I was doing, but I loved the money. It meant I was able to wear fashionable clothes not hand-me-downs and I never went hungry."

But Chrystal's life took an even darker turn when her friends introduced her to crack cocaine. She was soon hooked.

By then Chrystal was 15 and

her life was out of control. On one terrifying occasion she was kept against her will in a basement flat by a man. She decided the drugs had to stop if she was to stand any chance of turning her life around. By then she was living in London.

"I stayed off drugs for more than a year," she says. But temptation proved too much. "I was using crack to get high and heroin to come down, working flat out to fund my habit."

"I stopped caring about my health or how I looked – all that mattered was getting my next fix. I was spending £300 a day on drugs."

Over the next few years, Chrystal was jailed four times for

soliciting and shoplifting. It was when she was 22 that Chrystal was attacked and lost the sight in her left eye. "I heard footsteps behind me then a bottle smash and felt a piercing pain in the side of my face. It was excruciating," she says.

In a flash the attacker robbed Chrystal of the £20 she had on her, then ran off. A passer-by called an ambulance. "Paramedics stitched up my face but I refused to go to hospital. I was so desperate I went to work for money to buy drugs."

But when Chrystal got up the next day, she couldn't see properly. "I got the shock of my life when I looked in the mirror and saw my eye was a strange colour, but instead of going to hospital I

went to work then to score. I told myself it was just an infection in my eye that would get better."

It didn't. And a few months later, when Chrystal finally went to the hospital, she was told there was a splinter of glass in her eye. It had caused permanent damage and Chrystal had lost sight in her left eye.

Her life went from bad to worse over the next two years. She ended up in a homeless hostel, started injecting heroin instead of smoking it and was raped by clients. On one of these terrifying occasions, the attacker didn't use a condom. Chrystal reported the rape to the police, but the man was never caught.

Not long after that, Chrystal, who was 24, started feeling ill. "I

lost so much weight I was just skin and bone. I'm five-foot eight inches tall and had gone from 10-and-a-half stone to less than six. I could barely keep liquid down. When I started coughing up blood, I went to a doctor."

Chrystal was immediately sent to hospital where tests revealed she had TB and pneumonia. Even worse, Chrystal was HIV-positive. "I sat there in shock," she recalls. "I thought my life was over."

She hadn't seen her family for 10 years but made contact to explain what had happened. They visited her in hospital – and were shocked at her condition. "They broke down crying," she says.

"The last time they'd seen me I was a pretty 16-year-old with long hair and green eyes. Now I was painfully thin and disfigured by my blind eye."

"My ribs were sticking out, my skin was grey and there were needle marks in my arms from injecting."

"My dad was saying: 'We want you to sort yourself out.' But I wanted to kill myself."

It was only when Chrystal started chatting with other HIV-positive patients that she began to feel the first stirrings of hope.

"They told me how HIV medication is so effective that you can more or less live a normal life. That's when I realised I wanted to live and I wanted to turn my life

around," Chrystal says. "I thought HIV was Aids but, as people explained things to me, I understood that maybe this wasn't a life sentence. Maybe it was just my wake-up call to change to my life."

After three months in hospital Chrystal spent a month on a detox programme.

"Then I went into a rehab unit for three months, where I started learning how to live without crime."

"I was delighted to be free of drugs and back in touch with my family. I was also very lucky that my treatment was funded by a local drug project."

After Chrystal left rehab, she was offered a place in a house for recovering addicts. "I loved it there. The staff were supportive, and I was able to learn life skills like how to cook for myself. I'll never forget the satisfaction of cooking my first roast dinner."

Three months later, Chrystal moved into a resettlement house run by the Threshold Housing charity, then into a council flat. "Getting keys to my flat was like I'd won the lottery!"

Chrystal, who has been drug-free for 18 months now, wants to become a qualified drugs worker. She takes medication and has regular check-ups.

"I do voluntary work helping other addicts," says Chrystal, who has moved nearer her family. "Hopefully they won't have to go through what I did to realise how precious life is."

I heard a bottle smash then felt a piercing pain



RECOVERING: Chrystal now



PLAYFUL: Two-year-old Chrystal



INNOCENT: School portrait aged nine

For more info on Threshold Housing visit www.threshold.org.uk. To make a donation visit www.threshold.org.uk/donate

PICTURE: MARY PAGE