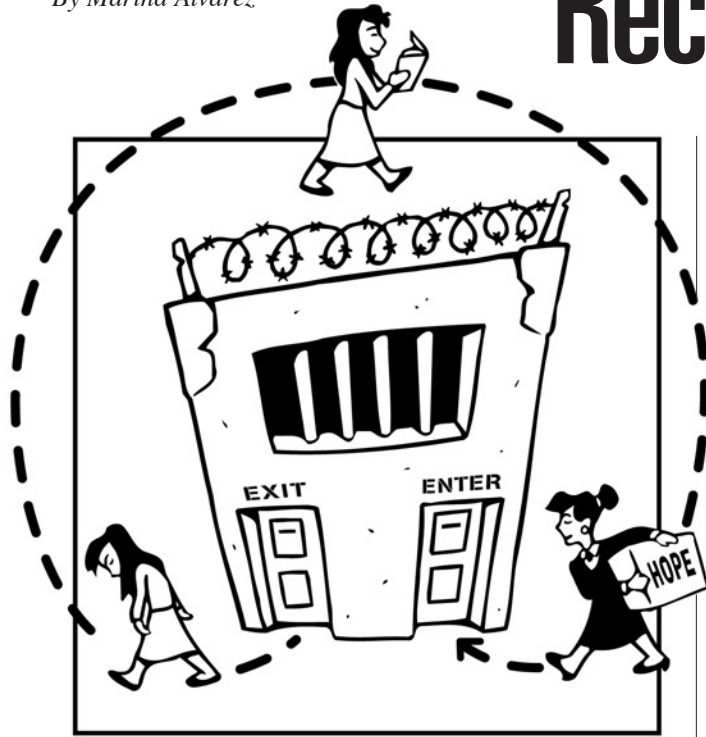


My Journey from Addiction and Incarceration to Recovery and Hope

By Marina Alvarez



I've always loved helping others. From a young age, I had hopes and dreams of finishing school to become a social worker. In school, I was popular, got good grades, made the honor roll and was voted valedictorian of my junior high school graduating class. Yet, education, knowledge and popularity could not overcome the feelings of insecurities and inadequacies that rumbled from deep within me.

I grew up in a dysfunctional home. For many years, an alcoholic family member sexually and emotionally abused me. I was told I would never amount to anything. I believed it. This caused me great pain and grief. I always felt separate, lost and alone.

Looking to escape my painful existence and reality, I started using alcohol and drugs at the tender age of 13. I desperately sought acceptance or approval from the "in-crowd" (drug users). At first getting high was fun and the drugs made me feel good. By age 16, I was injecting heroin and had to maintain a daily drug habit. A year later, with the birth of my first son, I struggled with motherhood and drug addiction. I experienced this turmoil again and again when my other sons were


born. Using drugs became the focus of my life. My personality changed and I hurt many people.

For the next 20 years, I was in and out of hospitals, rehabilitation centers and mental institutions. I abused drugs and the drugs abused me. As the saying goes, I had to beg borrow and steal, among other things, to supply and satisfy the drug use. I was arrested many times and convicted of numerous crimes. While serving time for my last felony conviction, in 1985, I became sick, was tested and diagnosed HIV+. The doctors told me that I had 2 years, at most, to live.

Angry, confused and in fear, I didn't know what to do. Immediately I thought of my children. I loved them dearly and wanted to offer them a better life than the one I'd had. In desperation, I turned to God in prayer. He answered.

Upon my release, I sought help for my addiction through a 12- step program and got the medical treatment I needed for HIV. I drew strength and courage from my family, friends and the amazing women in my support group. In 1990, I became a graduate of the first HIV peer education program in the Bronx.

Inspired by the information and education I received at the program, I turned my negative energy around and became actively involved, speaking out publicly about my struggle to help others with similar experiences. I've been interviewed on national television programs, portrayed in the cover story of a magazine and was the opening speaker at the World AIDS Conference in Amsterdam.

I was humbled when 15 years after my release from prison, I was invited back as a guest speaker to share my story and offer the inmates hope for a new way to live. I am most proud of the relationship I've developed with my family, especially my children. Despite my past, they respect me for who I am today. The love we share continues to motivate me and gives me a purpose to move ahead with my life. 

Marina Alvarez is a Latina AIDS educator and community organizer.