

# A miraculous return from the gates of hell



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## ***East Orange man draws on experience with drugs, HIV to give back to the people of N.J.***

BY MATT KADOSH

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He was strung out on crack and stark naked when a limo driver found him on the corner of Broad Street and Bloomfield Avenue in Newark one early Sunday morning 11 years ago.

However, Ulysses Larry Coleman, 58, of East Orange, is today thankful that the driver coaxed him into his trunk and drove him to the hospital. Previously, Coleman had spent 68 days in what was then the drug-infested Lincoln Hotel.

"I thought I was going to die," Coleman said about his experience that day. Since then Coleman has turned his life around and is helping others avoid the same mistakes he made. As part of these efforts, Coleman is helping to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS, which he contracted 13 years ago as a result of unprotected sex. He speaks to New Jersey audiences about his experiences so that they may avoid the same mistakes he made.

Now a full-time freshman at Bloomfield College, Coleman is majoring in sociology. During an interview on the steps of the college's library, he wore a white hooded sweatshirt, a thin ski-jacket, blue jeans and white polo shoes. He also sported a thin pair of black Gucci eyeglasses and had hints of a thin gray mustache.

"I try to give back to our community because there is too much pain," Coleman said. He has told his story to audiences at Seton Hall University, St. Dominic's school for girls, Caldwell College and recently at the Montclair Art Gallery. He has spoken for Volunteer Lawyers for Justice, a group of attorneys who match those in need with free legal services, and he has also told his story to audiences at state prisons.

"I go to where the people are," Coleman explained. He described his philosophy in helping others. "I let you look at me and make the comparison."

In this way, Coleman said, he can show his audiences how they can improve their lives and avoid mistakes he made.

He splits his time between his East Orange home, where he lives with his wife, 49-year-old Karney Coleman and Bloomfield College, where he took classes in political science, sociology, argumentative writing and algebra this spring semester. Coleman said he has greatly improved his skills since he started. It's a challenge for him because of the amount of time he must put into his classes. He said he types slowly with two fingers but has improved the speed at which he can write.

"I pop out essays like this now," Coleman said, snapping his fingers.

Coleman began his studies last year when he got his driver's license back - a task the Volunteer Lawyers for Justice Re-entry Legal Services Program, known as ReLeSe, helped him with.

"I had a \$4,100 surcharge that Motor Vehicles sent to a collection agency. My license was suspended for almost ten years when I met an attorney from ReLeSe. She went to court with me, contacted the collection agency. Now I'm on a payment plan, have my license back. Thanks to ReLeSe, I'm driving, can get to school, and life is easier because I

have my driver's license," Coleman said in a statement.

During the interview, he retrieved a skinny Black and Mild Cigar from a pack in his pocket and lit it.

"It's my only vice," Coleman explained before he released some of the sweet smoke from his mouth. He then described how he got to where he was today.

Coleman was arrested with 13 members of his brother, Rodney J. Coleman's, drug ring on Dec. 30, 2004. Police called it Phase I of "Operation Out-of-Towners," which eventually would bust 18 more members of the drug ring, according to a statement from then Attorney General Peter Harvey. Other than being in his brother's apartment when police arrived, Coleman denies having anything to do with his brother's drug ring.

Following his 2004 arrest, Coleman spent 18 months in Delaney Hall, a drug rehabilitation facility in Newark for low-level offenders. At the time, he said he was awaiting trial for misdemeanor drug charges.

"I could have made bail, but then I would have been homeless," Coleman said. His most memorable moment in prison, he said, was when a nun gave him a key ring. At the time he didn't understand what to do with the key ring, but the nun assured him that someday he would be out of prison and would need a way to carry his keys. Before his time in Delaney hall, Coleman used his middle name, Larry, but has since shed the name in favor of his first name-Ulysses. It was part of his transformation.

"Larry was my demon," Coleman explained. Now, if anyone calls asking for Larry, he does not speak with the caller. Just month ago, Coleman said, someone called asking for Larry and he changed his phone number. "I put Larry back in the box."

He traces his life of drugs back to 1969, when he graduated high school and started selling marijuana. This, he said, took him away from his dreams of becoming a police officer and soon he was addicted to his own product. In 1973, Coleman said he experimented with intravenous drugs and by the 1980s he was smoking crack.

From 1974 to 1994, Coleman worked as a trucker for Roadway Express Trucking in North Bergen and is proud his work there.

"We was brothers, Teamsters, truckers!" he said. Coleman explained that in his time working for Roadway Express, he traveled Northern New Jersey, where he worked with multi-millionaires. Nevertheless, Coleman continued his drug use, and in 1994, Roadway Express fired Coleman when a urine test revealed he had been taking drugs. Still, Coleman looks forward to collecting his retirement in seven years.

Coleman's family committed him to Marlboro Mental Hospital in 1997, after the limousine driver found him naked on Broad Street in Newark. At the time, the driver gave him a cloth to cover himself with, put him in his trunk and drove him to the hospital. Doctors diagnosed him bipolar disorder.

"Marlboro was like being in Heaven, on an 80 acre soybean farm with doctors and nurses," he said. When Marlboro closed in 1998, the doctors transferred him to Overbrook Mental Hospital in Verona, where his experience was less pleasant. "There was real people who was off the hook," Coleman said about the other patients at Overbrook.

For a time, Coleman took so much psychiatric medication that his hands would shake. Now he says he only takes one medication and his symptoms have subsided. With the exception of several weeks in a crisis center at the University of Medicine and Dentistry in Newark in 1999, Coleman has been healthy.

He receives Social Security Disability Insurance and Medicaid for his mental illness.

"New Jersey is one of the most caring places in the country," Coleman said about the services the state provides. He suspects that if he lived in other states he would not be alive.

This spring semester, Coleman took courses in political science, sociology, argumentative writing and algebra. He takes his studies seriously and finds it hard to understand students who do not.

"I go to school to improve my skills," Coleman said. He explained "You can't repo' education," and added that he finds it hard to understand many of the younger students who do not take their education as seriously as he does his.

In April, Coleman went to Bursar's office where he changed his major from political science to sociology. That major, he said, better fits with his goals to work with people and give back to the community.

As part of his giving back, Coleman wants to start an HIV prevention program at the Metropolitan Baptist Church in Newark. However his efforts to start an HIV health ministry have not taken. He suspects it's because they don't want to publicize the problem of HIV. He explained that in many black churches they don't want to talk about HIV.

"They'll talk about cancer, diabetes. They won't talk about HIV." Although he later added: "When God is ready, HIV isn't going away."

Coleman has been hospitalized for medical difficulties stemming from his HIV diagnosis, but believes he is lucky to be healthy today. He has T-Cell Count of over 1,000, which indicates high levels of immunity toward infection. Coleman attributes his successful life today to his family and his efforts to stay healthy.

"I have a good family and support and they never shun me about my HIV," Coleman said. He added that eating right, having safe sex and taking his medications are also things he has done to help build his life to what it is today.

What does he think about politics today?

"M.B., Ph.D., it doesn't mean nothing," Coleman said. Speaking about wealthy people who have recently lost investments or jobs he said, "They don't know how to live poor." Since his youth growing up on a "cold-water flat," in Newark, "where everybody knew everybody," Coleman has learned how to live poor and said he is lucky just to have food in the refrigerator.

Coleman is satisfied with his life.

"I can say I'm ready to go. 'Lord take me now.' For real, for real," he said.

His philosophy is simple. "It's not how much money you have in your pocket. It's how much God you have in your heart."

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