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THE METH MENACE

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Illustration: Photos by Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

David Guerrero is reflected in his rear-view mirror as he drives through Long Beach. The 37-year-old now lives in Palm Springs, where he is trying to free himself from the clutches of crystal methamphetamine. Guerrero counts his HIV medication every night. An odd number means he's remembered to take his morning pill. David Guerrero meets with Dr. **Rebecca Kuhn** at St. Mary Medical Centers CARE program. Guerrero has been HIV-positive for 12 years. Rose Tijerina-Swearingen gives Guerrero a hug. Tijerina-Swearingen is the founder of Life's Journey Center in Palm Springs, where Guerrero was treated for his meth addiction. Guerrero sports a Dump Tina button at the Long Beach Lesbian and Gay Pride Festival. Tina is a nickname for crystal meth. Guerrero drives his Mercedes through Palm Springs. Guerrero and friend Jerry Ayala take a nap. HIV medication tires him. Guerrero, terrified of heights, holds on to a pole during an aerial tram ride up the side of a Palm Springs mountain. But the ride up the mountain is worth it. Guerrero cools off in Mt. Jacinto State Park and gets some sun with friend Jerry Ayala. Barry Flynn, Guerrero's sponsor in his battle against crystal meth addiction, and Guerrero attend the Long Beach Gay Pride Parade in May.

David Guerrero sucks in a shallow gasp as the ground rapidly recedes below him.

The 37-year-old Long Beach man is inside an aerial tramway, 3,000 feet above Palm Springs, and he's starting to panic. He grabs a waist-high rail with one hand and a metal pole with another. He turns away from a window that frames the tiny buildings below. "I can't look back," he says. Around him, couples and families huddle, taking in the scenery. Outside, a Sonoran desert cliff gives way to a sheer granite face. The tram is halfway up the mountain, but Guerrero has seen enough. Shakily, he lowers his 5-foot-11 frame onto the floor and eases into a cross-legged position. The trolley jolts and shudders as it hits a bump in the rails. "Oh my God," he whispers, and reaches again for something to hold onto.

For a man with such a profound fear of heights, David Guerrero has spent much of his life teetering on the edge. For 17 years, he has struggled with an addiction to crystal methamphetamine, the so-called "sex drug" that drove him to engage in the risky sexual behavior that led to his diagnosis of HIV 12

years ago. Although Guerrero acknowledges that crystal meth robbed him of his health and pulled him into a world of deviance and disease, he says his urge to use remains powerful and, at times, overwhelming. For Guerrero, the trail to recovery has been treacherous and overgrown with temptation, with each attempt at treatment darkened by relapse.

Nothing has come easy. Addiction ran in Guerrero's family. His father was a heroin addict and his grandfather an alcoholic. But it was being repeatedly molested by his priest when he was 9 that he says most likely pushed him over the edge. The priest was later convicted of child molestation and committed suicide. The whole experience, Guerrero said, left him hollow, and looking for something to fill the void.

Guerrero took his first hit of crystal meth when he was 22. His cousin, who was snorting lines with a friend in the bathroom of his Norwalk apartment, introduced him to the drug. That day, as the stimulant entered Guerrero's nasal passage, and then his bloodstream, his mind and body were delivered to a new dimension of dizzying exhilaration, he said. "Right when I did that first line, I wanted more," Guerrero recalls. "And the craving never went away." He soon graduated to smoking meth, which quieted his inner demons. It also made him feel something he wasn't expecting: normal. Guerrero describes smoking meth as an "adrenaline rush on top of (an) adrenaline rush." "When I take the first hit, it's like nirvana," he says. "Any worry in my mind disappears. It's like nothing can stop me. Like I'm able to conquer the world. It's bliss. Like I'm on a roller coaster ride and I just did the big loop." And meth was always connected to sex. When he was high, he would seek out anonymous sexual partners at clubs, sex parties or bathhouses. His behavior was spontaneous, uninhibited and carnal, and sex felt euphoric and unending. While he knew he was HIV-positive, he often didn't use condoms. But no matter how dazzling the high, it was nothing compared with the low, he says. Coming down, bliss was replaced with shame and fear; adrenaline with profound depression.

"It's very Satan-like, very dark side," Guerrero says. "It thrives in darkness." Using took away his self-respect and robbed his life of value and purpose, he said. Along with HIV, he contracted syphilis and a staph infection that caused an abscess on the back of his head. Cars, condoms, Coke cans Finding the drug in Long Beach was nearly effortless. "I could walk down Broadway right now and literally get high for free," he says during an interview in Long Beach before the Palm Springs trip. "For any guy who's cute, it's like an American Express Gold Card to do drugs." On a drive down Cherry Avenue and along Broadway, through an area known as a main artery for the gay party scene, Guerrero points out his old haunts. "See that house right there?" he asks, gesturing to a blue, boarded-up building on Broadway with Coke cans and condom wrappers strewn about the lawn. "That was a drug den. When I got syphilis, I told the city about that."

He describes the interior: Dark rooms, televisions flashing nonstop pornography, clothes scattered across the ground, candles, a heavy stink, door handles covered in lube. A modern-day metropolis of sin, he calls it. Sun slants through the car window, highlighting a leather armband and a fleur-de-lis tattoo stretched along his forearm. As Guerrero drives, his brown eyes frequently wander and his talk is cut short by deep, glassy-eyed reflection.

He pulls off Ocean Boulevard and into a Belmont Shore parking lot along the water at Granada Avenue. It's his old hunting ground, a spot he used to frequent to score partners and drugs. Sea breeze mingles with exhaust at the lot, where 10 cars are parked. An old, beat-up truck is sandwiched between a Mercedes and a brand-new Acura. Inside each car, a man sits alone. Two men stand on a corner chatting, and a white Mustang slowly drives in circles. "I used to stay here all day long in my car," Guerrero says, and falls quiet. "I used to sit here loaded all day."

For Guerrero, it went like this. He'd cruise the lot or wait until he saw a man he liked. "I'd probably pull up to his car and say, 'Hey, what's up?'" he begins. Then, a series of questions. He taps the steering wheel as he runs through the drill: "Do you do drugs? Are you high right now? Do you have a place to go?" But meanwhile, he says, a feeling gnawed at him, a powerful desire for something different.

Guerrero is handsome, with mahogany skin and well-chiseled features. His expression, usually serene and peaceful, is tempered by a severe, streetwise sensibility. He is warm and outgoing, a natural comedian, with an uncanny knack for impersonations of Edith Massey, who starred in numerous John Waters films. But his personality changed when he was using. He became cranky and withdrawn. He returned home after sunrise, retreated into his room and locked the door. He had trouble holding down jobs. His drug abuse also took a toll on his family. Their normally tight-knit relationship became distant and detached. His mother, Minerva, would have panic attacks and stay up all night when she knew her son was using. "I'd get so caught up in what was happening to David, I couldn't breathe," she says. "I brought David into this earth, I gave birth to him, and what is a mother supposed to do? You're supposed to protect your children. I felt like I had done something wrong." She pauses, looking down at her hands. "It's been really hard." Reality bites

In 2000, David enrolled in an alcohol and drug rehabilitation program in Palm Springs, and spent about a year in a sober-living house in San Francisco, where he helped run an HIV-testing program. Eleven months later, he relapsed. And it all started again. Getting loaded. Cruising for partners. Looking for drugs. Compulsive sex. By Jan. 14, 2005, he had lost 40 pounds. "I looked like I was dying of AIDS," he says. So he enrolled in a different type of treatment center in Palm Springs, an expensive 20-bed facility called Life's Journey Center, with a focus on individual counseling.

As soon as he checked in, counselors at the treatment facility knew he would be a hard case. Treating Guerrero involved combating more than addiction: sexual behaviors and the sexual abuse he experienced as a child, said Rose Tijerina-Swearingen, the center's executive director. For the first month, Guerrero was still coming down from the drug. He slept, he ate, and he socialized with other addicts. He attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings where he met Barry Flynn, a 52-yearold recovering alcoholic, who became his sponsor. Tijerina Swearingen called it his ``honeymoon stage."

But as he entered the second month, the therapy took on a high-pitched intensity. And Guerrero didn't like it. He didn't like the 12-step prescription of having to talk nakedly about childhood trauma, his deeply rooted troubles and the pain he caused others. ``Things started becoming very real," Guerrero said. ``They start digging stuff out of you. And your body sort of is in shock - - you're craving it, life starts kicking in and you start going crazy."

Meanwhile, he was awarded more than \$1 million from the Orange County Catholic diocese, and he was about to collect his check. As his second month of sobriety came to a close, Guerrero begged his parents to let him come home. He complained that the food was bad and the program expensive. The director of the center urged him not to return to Long Beach. Temptation there was too strong. Addicts are often sneaky and returning to a familiar environment is not recommended, Tijerina-Swearingen said. ``Lots of people told me, `Don't return home, don't return home, don't return home,'" Guerrero says. Pipe dreams

He blew off the advice. In early February, he moved back into his parents' Long Beach apartment. He bought a Mercedes. He went to 12-step meetings. But sober life in his old environment was strange and lonely. It was like an alternative reality, a time warp. He avoided dangerous places, and cut off contact with drug using friends. He yearned to visit his ex-boyfriend, who was still using, but knew he shouldn't.

On his 90th day sober, a month after returning from treatment, everything doctors and friends had predicted came true. It was early March. He was driving home from a Narcotics Anonymous meeting at about 6 p.m. when he spotted his cousin, who introduced him to meth 17 years before, walking along Pacific Coast Highway. ``The minute I saw him, my adrenaline started going," Guerrero recalls. He pulled over to say hello. His cousin got into the car. They drove to a downtown motel. Immediately, the old familiar craving, a combined ache for the drug and for sex on the drug returned, eclipsing his newly gained self-respect and sobriety. They entered the motel room. His cousin pulled out a pipe. ``Give me the pipe," Guerrero said. And just like that, 90 days of sobriety was liquefied with the shards of meth, no more than white smoke rising from a pipe. ``I wanted to have some really bad, and then I wanted to leave and go have sex with someone," Guerrero says later. ``I stayed out until 7 in the morning. ... Then I finally realized, `What am I doing?' I just got out of rehab and I've got so many positive things going on in my life."

Still, every time he drives down Broadway, his mind floods with memories of dirty, chemical-fumed apartments, hours of unprotected sex and the sometimes-euphoric adrenaline rush as the drug enters his lungs. "There are so many triggers," he says. "They're around every corner, everywhere you turn."

Two weeks after the first relapse, it happened again. The same cousin. Another hotel room. This time, Guerrero disappeared for several days. Flynn, who had appointed himself Guerrero's sponsor a month before, had been talking to him daily, and when his calls went unreturned, he grew concerned. He called Guerrero's mother, who broke down over the phone. "He can't go around the corner, he can't go two blocks, he can't go four blocks, without running into someone who's using," Minerva says. So Flynn drove to Long Beach. He found Guerrero at the beach parking lot sitting in the car. His expression was stoned and numb, but his eyes were full of fear, Flynn said. He implored Guerrero to immediately come back to the desert. "You can be here and be dead, or you can be in Palm Springs and be alive," Flynn said he told him. Guerrero told Flynn he'd meet him there, he needed more time. Flynn drove up ahead of him, worried that Guerrero would never make it back. That night, Guerrero went home, packed a small suitcase and drove back to the desert.

Life after meth

Guerrero says his feelings about Palm Springs are conflicted. His sober community is warm, nurturing and safe. But he often mourns the fast-paced lifestyle of his youth. "Sometimes I don't want to be in the desert," he says. "I want to live in L.A., in New York. I want to be fast. But my heart is telling me, I have to live in the desert. I have to be here where there's no temptation, where there are just older men, where there's no one to be attracted to." Even a weekend trip back to Long Beach for the gay pride festival was a litany of temptation. By a jewelry booth, an ex-boyfriend approached him, offered him a strong drink and asked him if he wanted to get high. Outside the dance tent, old friends pull him in, kissed him on the lips, told him they missed him. Inside, a deep bass bumped under a pulsing techno beat and sweaty, shirtless men in tattoos rubbed against each other, feet stomping, arms outstretched. Guerrero watched with intensity in his eyes. "The children are alive. It's like the 'Children of the Corn,'" he says. He held his hat over his head, as if using it to channel the energy. "There's some partying going on, I can feel it."

Through self-control and with his sponsor by his side, he managed to stay sober that day, and every day since then. Guerrero's life in Palm Springs has a peace and uniformity that was absent in Long Beach. He's stubbornly engaged in a pilgrimage to his spiritual center, one where substances of any kind are enemy and self-awareness is king. Every morning, he wakes up at 6:30, writes a to-do list and then attends an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

He tries to treat himself to something nice during the day: a movie, a manicure or a bath. He goes to the gym three times a week. Dinner, or a cup of coffee in the evening, is spent with sober friends. And he just moved into a modern, two-bedroom house. Every night before going to sleep, Guerrero performs a ritual. He empties his bottle of green Trizivir pills onto the cream bedspread and counts them. An odd number means he's on schedule with his HIV medications. An even number means he's forgotten his morning pill. Adherence is vital to managing HIV, and he knows that if he's not careful about taking his meds, the virus could mutate. The nights are the hardest. That's when he gets lonely and bored. He's not ready to date yet, but Palm Springs friends, such as Flynn and Jerry Ayala, an old childhood ally who is also recovering from crystal meth addiction, keep him focused and grounded. Plus, he worries that sex will trigger his addiction. "It almost screws your whole sex life up," he said. "Sex almost becomes boring after you've had sex with crystal meth."

Ayala recently told Guerrero that he seemed different since he'd gotten clean. "He was like the Tasmanian devil before," Ayala said. "He's more pleasant to be around now, less judgmental. He seems older." "I'm not more mellow," Guerrero shot back. "I'm struggling to be mellow. I'm constantly in a battle to change my life."

High inspirations

Back on the tram, high above Palm Springs, Guerrero finally feels the shaky cab come to a rest. Guerrero and Ayala step off the tramway and into the mountain station, a gateway to Mount Jacinto State Park. Guerrero is a little shaky in the knees, but relieved to be on solid ground. He's hungry, and buys bags of Cheetos and gummy worms. The two, both clad in snug blue shirts and cutoff army pants, follow a winding trail down the mountain and enter an open grove. The air is thick with the scent of mountain pine. Snow-dusted peaks arch above them. The temperature is nearing three digits in the valley, but at 8,000 feet, it's clear and cool. As if mocking the serenity, Guerrero breaks into a nasal falsetto and begins humming the Disney melody from a scene in "Snow White," where she's frolicking through the forest and feeding the animals. He straddles a fallen tree and, squinting his eyes, transitions into an impersonation of the John Waters film, "Pink Flamingos." "Eggman, I want to marry you," he screeches. "Oh Gator, why do you have to be a heterosexual. You can be a homosexual and have a boyfriend and a hairdresser." It's a perfect imitation, and some passing hikers chuckle. Others speed up. In the mountains, Guerrero sings, points out lizards and squirrels and inspects bark on a tree trunk. He scales a 20-foot boulder and lies face up on the flat rock, staring at the sky. "Oh Eggman," he says, in his scratchy, John Waters-inspired voice. "Look at all the beautifulness."

The ride down is no less scary than the ride up for Guerrero. Again, he sits on the ground clutching the pole, while everyone else stands above him. "It's scary Jerry, isn't it scary?" he asks.

He inches his body toward the window and sneaks a look down, and his eyes fill with horror, as if gazing into an abyss. At noon, the cab lands on solid ground, back in Palm Springs. Guerrero steps off the tramway and heads toward the parking lot, with Ayala by his side. His hair is messy from dipping his head in the river, his dark skin slightly sunburned. He radiates a rugged well-being that comes from healthy adrenaline and time spent in nature. Still, he tires easily, a side effect of his medication, and he's on his way back to the hotel for his daily afternoon nap. But before getting into his car, Guerrero stops, turns and tips his head upward toward the snow-tipped mountains, framed by clear desert sky. He takes in one last look.

``Wow, Jerry," he says, touching his friend on the shoulder. ``Look how high we were. I can't believe we were that high."