



Linda

2009 Hero

At 62, **Linda** has finally fulfilled her childhood dream to become a bus driver. She's traveled a long, painful road to get there.

When Linda was 10, her friend's father and uncle gave her beer and cigarettes, then molested her. The sexual abuse continued for years, and those first sips turned into a dependency on alcohol to mask the pain and shame. As she got older, she turned to PCP and crack cocaine. She married a man who hit her with iron pipes and two-by-fours. To her, this was love. She put up with the abuse and used drugs and alcohol to kill the pain. When she finally ran from her husband and the beatings, she found herself homeless.

For four years, Linda lived in a hotel that warehoused people from the shelters. At night, she would knock on doors to offer sexual favors for money. Then she'd visit the run-down tenements nearby to buy drugs, get high and, often, pass out in the hallways overnight. She smelled so bad that the superintendent walked by her in the mornings and told her, "Linda, you stink." He would then throw bleach on her as she lay there. For years, her nickname was "Stinky Linda."

In 1998, Linda was arrested for helping an undercover officer buy drugs. "I pleaded with God to take the taste of drugs out of my mouth." She entered detox, and shortly after she was diagnosed with H.I.V. She was scared. On the streets, Linda had seen friends with AIDS die slow, agonizing deaths.

Uneducated about the virus and unable to afford healthcare, Linda turned to Harlem United. There, she got medical and dental treatment, counseling, therapy and a place to live. Linda says that Harlem United saved her life. And among the staff and clients of Harlem United, she also found a family she could count on. The day before Linda's commercial driver's license exam, Harlem United's C.E.O. Patrick

McGovern took her out in a program van to help her practice and calm her nerves. In November, Linda celebrated her 12th year of being drug- and alcohol-free with the Harlem United family that calls her "Nana."

Every morning, Linda is up at 3:30 a.m. She commutes from Harlem to Staten Island, where she transports mentally challenged clients by bus to their daily treatments and therapy. She couldn't be happier. With her new job, she is on her way to financial independence, and she has Harlem United to thank. "My self-esteem when I came here was lower than the gutter. Once I walked through the doors, I found me. I can't see myself without Harlem United."

Harlem United's programs respond to the needs of people whose H.I.V. diagnosis is complicated by homelessness, mental illness and substance abuse. Robin Hood has funded Harlem United since its inception and has helped it grow into a leading resource for people with H.I.V./AIDS. In 1988, Harlem United began as a volunteer organization that provided counseling and shelter in 20 apartments. Now it is a professional institution, managing 545 apartments and running health centers and outreach programs that provide over 7,000 people with housing, primary medical care, H.I.V. testing, nutritional training, mental health services, support groups, meals, 6,000 H.I.V. tests and 500,000 clean syringes.