



Stanley Ziel was born and raised in the South Bronx, where the kids in his neighborhood nicknamed him “Smiley” and “Blondie.” His father worked as a lugger in the meat industry, and often struggled to support his nine children: five boys and four girls. “I know what it’s like to be poor,” says Stanley. “We were sitting on milk crates instead of furniture.”

After his favorite older brother, Johnny, overdosed on heroin when Stanley was twelve, he began using drugs as well. Stanley’s father saved him from a heroin overdose the next year. “I was blue,” he says. “My father ran all the way from our apartment and gave me mouth to mouth. He saved my life.”

Stanley continued using heroin until he was seventeen, when he switched to methadone – first street methadone, then methadone from a clinic. During the time he was using, Stanley became a lugger like his father, then a butcher. He worked full time as a butcher to support his wife and family of three children, one of whom, Stanley Jr., he delivered at home.

After thirty-six years of heroin and methadone addiction, Stanley says, “I finally hit rock bottom. Nothing was working any more. I said enough was enough.” He checked himself in to the Samaritan Village in 2001, and has been clean since his release the following year. “Those days are so over,” he says. Stanley and his brother Joey are the only surviving men from the Ziel household. “I’m not going out like my brothers,” he says. “Somehow, I got lucky.”

Stanley looks back on his past with a mixture of regret and self-forgiveness. Since he became clean he has spoken honestly with his children, and is in regular contact with them and his six grandchildren. “I was an addict when I was raising them,” he says. “I screwed up. But I tried to do the best I could, and I’m still trying to do the best I can. You’ve got to let go of the past,” he adds. “If you don’t, it will eat you up inside.”

Today Stanley is optimistic about his future. He works full-time as a baker at Zaro’s in Penn Station, a job he loves. He has been living in the Cecil Hotel for over two years, and plans on moving to Kenmore Hall, which is closer to his job, in June. “I want to be the king of my own destiny,” he says. “Everything that happens today is my decision. Everything that happens from now on is because of the choices I make.”