

CURRENT SCIENCE

March 12, 2010 • Vol. 95 • Issue 13 www.weeklyreader.com

SPECIAL CAREERS EDITION!



Life Saver

Tracy Jones's job takes her through the streets of New York, healing the homeless.



By Joshua Kors

Driven to Serve



Carrin Ackerman/Weekly Reader; Background: Shutterstock

+ Wake up at sunrise any day of the week in New York City and you might catch a glimpse of Tracy

Jones steering her van through the streets. Jones doesn't transport packages for the post office or vegetables to local supermarkets. She delivers something far more important: medical care for New Yorkers in desperate need.

Jones drives the van for Project Renewal, a charitable organization that serves the city's 37,000 homeless residents, providing free medical care out of its mobile medical office. The MedVan crisscrosses New York's poorest neighborhoods, stopping at soup kitchens and homeless shelters, where sizable crowds gather to be treated for everything from sprained ankles to asthma to acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS).

Tracy Jones and her MedVan are out on the street, helping New York City's homeless.

"Everywhere we go, there's a line of people waiting to see our doctors," says Jones. "We see a lot of clients for many years. They form a trust with us."

EXPANDING ROLE

Before she started driving the MedVan, Jones worked for the city's Administration for Children's Services. Her job was to pick up abandoned and abused kids and transport them to a hospital or foster care. Then Jones heard about the position at Project Renewal.

Jones smiles. "To be honest," she says, "I didn't know what I was getting into."

It didn't take long for Jones to develop a passion for the job, or for the doctors on the van to notice. "What's special about Tracy is that she's always prepared," says Minzalia Zoubtsova, a MedVan physician. "She has a good connection with the patients." The directors of Project Renewal asked Jones to take an expanded role in the MedVan. She returned to school and became a *phlebotomist*, someone trained to draw patients' blood.

The blood she draws is tested for *human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)*, the *pathogen* (disease-causing agent) that causes AIDS. HIV attacks the body's immune system, leaving it highly susceptible to *opportunistic infections*—infections that don't often affect healthy

people. People who have AIDS are particularly vulnerable to tuberculosis, pneumonia, and meningitis.

New York City is the epicenter of the country's HIV/AIDS epidemic, with more cases than San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., combined. More than 100,000 New Yorkers are living with HIV, according to the city's health department. The city's homeless are more than twice as likely as its other residents to be infected with the virus.

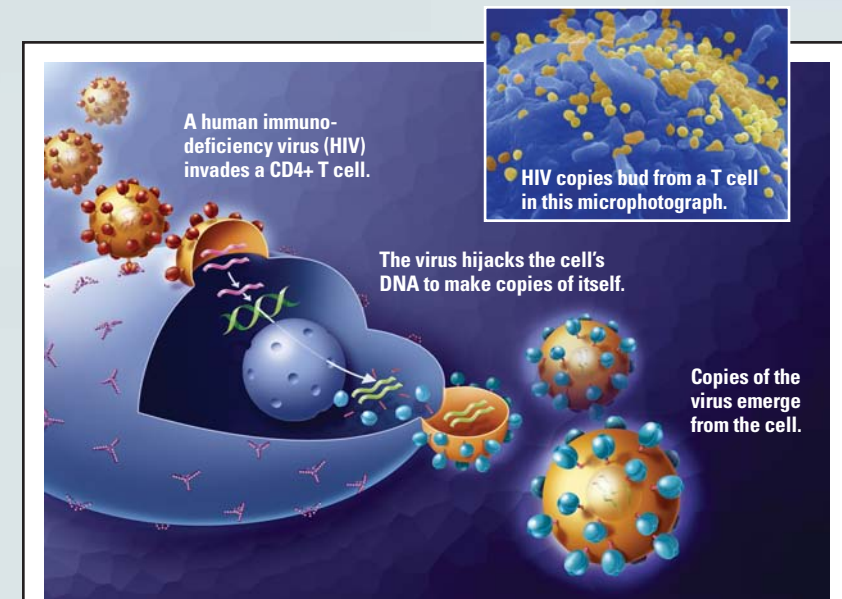
To test for HIV, Jones first swabs the gums of a patient's mouth to get a saliva sample. The sample is then quickly tested for *antibodies* to HIV. Antibodies are proteins created by the body's immune system in response to the presence of *antigens* (foreign agents), such as viruses or bacteria. If the saliva tests positive for the virus, Jones draws a sample of blood and sends it to a lab to confirm the diagnosis.

LIFE OF SERVICE

Jones recently took on another role in the MedVan: She is now a certified HIV counselor. She counsels patients while they wait for their HIV tests to be processed. During that time, "a lot of crazy thoughts go through their minds," says Jones. "I try to feel out whether they're going to need long-term counseling or, in extreme situations, whether they're going to be violent."

An HIV diagnosis was once considered an almost immediate death sentence, so harsh and rapid was the virus's progress. Now its impact can be blunted with a mixture of drugs that inhibit its spread in the body. People with HIV are

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When HIV Attacks

When HIV enters the body, it attacks *CD4+ T cells*—white blood cells that are a crucial part of the immune system. The virus enters a CD4+ T cell and hijacks its genetic machinery to make copies of itself. The new virus particles burst from the membrane of the CD4+ T cell, killing it and infecting other CD4+ T cells. That eventually weakens the immune system, making the body susceptible to diseases caused by bacteria, fungi, parasites, and other viruses that are normally kept in check by a healthy immune system.

A diagnosis of AIDS is made when the CD4+ T cell count drops below a certain level and one or more of certain infections, such as pneumonia and tuberculosis, are present. Although treatments can slow the course of an HIV infection, there is no vaccine or cure. HIV has killed 25 million people worldwide, according to the World Health Organization. More than 33 million people are living with the virus today.

BSIP/Photo Researchers, Inc.; Inset: Dr. Olivier Schwartz/Photo Researchers, Inc.

now living longer. Still, there is no cure for HIV, so receiving the diagnosis can be traumatic. "I remember one young man; he didn't know he was positive. He was devastated," says Jones. "I still remember the look on his face when he walked out."

"But you can't let your own emotions get in the way," she says of the attitude she must take as a counselor. "I stay focused on my job: provide counseling and let patients know about prevention techniques."

The more she works on the van, says Jones, the more she realizes how important the service is to the

community. It's what motivates her to wake up at 4 in the morning, take a bus, a ferry, and a subway to the MedVan, and then work until 8 in the evening. "It's a commitment," she says.

Public service is an ethic Jones lives by even when she's off the clock. She and her friends started their own community service organization, the Miss, Ms. and Mrs. Lady Bugs, which assists at local food pantries. Although her work isn't making her rich, "I do feel wealthy," she says. "But it's a different kind of wealth. We're doing a good thing for people." **CS**