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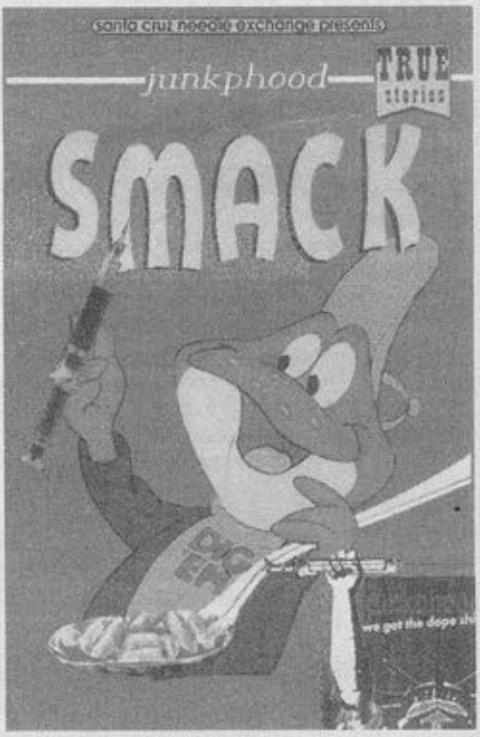
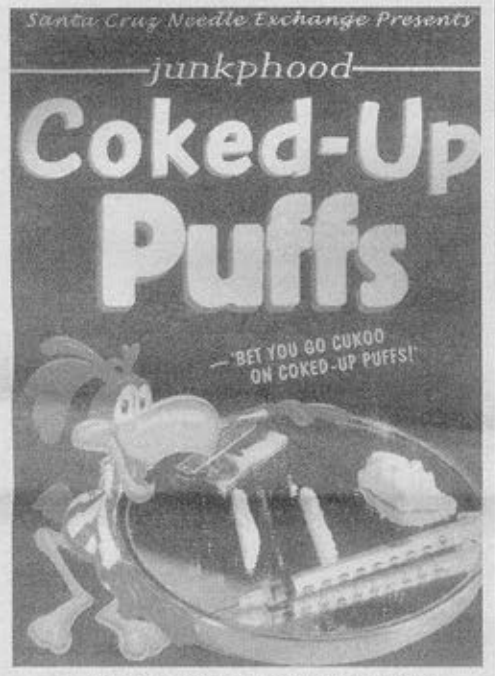
TIPS FOR JUNKIES

A ZINE CALLED *JUNKPHOOD* TEACHES YOUNG USERS HOW TO SHOOT UP SAFELY, AND WINS PRAISE FROM DRUG POLICY EXPERTS

Junkphood cofounder Heather Edney: "It's okay to be a proud junkie."

By Jennifer Gonnerman





***Junkphood* covers: a hip junkie aesthetic**

SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA— It all started three years ago, in the cereal aisle of the local Safeway. High on heroin, Heather Edney, then 24, and her best friend, Matthew Bowman, stumbled through the supermarket. In the Kellogg's section, they found their inspiration. "We saw the Sugar Smacks cereal box and we were kinda tripping on it," Edney says. "We were like, 'That cover is begging to be fucked with.' "

And so that's exactly what they did. With help from Kinko's photocopiers, the two friends made a parody of the box cover in which the grinning Sugar Smacks frog appeared to be selling not a sugary cereal, but "smack," or heroin. Bowman and Edney then created a zine for young injection drug users, and slapped their Sugar Smacks spoof on its cover.

That zine, called *Junkphood*, has become one of the nation's most provocative publications about drugs. It reads like a manual on how to inject drugs as safely as possible—without ever telling readers to stop. The stories in *Junkphood* are told by junkies themselves, mainly the young users who swap syringes at the Santa Cruz Needle Exchange. And the zine's art work is stunningly sophisticated. *Junkphood*'s creators mock the mainstream by skillfully manipulating cultural icons, mixing up Batman and Barbie with images of hypodermic needles to create a hip junkie aesthetic.

Junkphood's founders never imagined their publication would sell hundreds of copies, or attract international attention. They had no idea that some drug policy activists would praise their zine for its ability to reach an often-ignored population. Nor did they figure that the Manhattan-based Lindesmith Center, the drug policy think tank funded by billionaire George Soros, would become one of *Junkphood*'s biggest buyers.

And the zine's creators had no way of knowing how much and how quickly their own lives would change. So far, there have been four issues of the zine and two more are expected to be published in late September. But the new editions of *Junkphood* will be markedly different. Three years and several deaths later, *Junkphood*'s founders—and the zine itself—no longer view drugs quite the same way.

EDNEY AND BOWMAN met at the Santa Cruz Needle Exchange, which he cofounded in 1990 and she headed. They created *Junkphood* with the help of Brooke Lober, an 18-year-old college student. But from almost the beginning, Edney was the zine's driving force. With her long, jet-black hair, calf-high leather boots, and upbringing in the San Fernando Valley, Edney seems part East Village chic, part valley girl. She is ambitious and intelligent, and has been pill-popping and shooting up since she was 15 years old.

Santa Cruz, like San Francisco and Seattle, attracts more than its share of homeless youth. Many of these drifters, virtually all of whom are white, eventually wind up at the needle exchange. They include squatter kids living in the nearby mountains and runaways who fled abusive homes. To find material for *Junkphood*, the zine's founders CONTINUED ON PAGE 42

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grabbed a tape recorder, got high, and conducted curbside interviews with these users. Then they typed up the responses they received. It is the world of these junkies, and their aesthetic, that *Junkphood* reflects.

Junkphood's first three issues came out in 1995. Each was 22 pages long, and focused on a different drug: heroin, cocaine, or amphetamines. Interview topics included junkies' "rush of the century" and their first high. One user reported: "*the first time I used it* [coke] *i was at a slayer concert! i was just like this fucking 14 year old valley girl who went to this concert with my punk boyfriend. . . . well, there was this group of hell's angels sitting in the row behind me and they were doing lines during the concert. and i kept on, like, coyly looking behind me cause i wanted to check their shit out . . . and finally this guy offers me a line. i remember that he handed me this gross dollar bill that had just been up all their noses.*"

Besides junkies' tales, *Junkphood* included helpful tips for its target audience: 14- to 22-year-old injection drug users. Some pointers were common sense, others derived from experience. Snort amphetamines if your veins are too messed up to inject. Call 911 if your friend is overdosing from coke. Smoke pot to take the edge off when you are crashing from speed. Use a hospital-style tourniquet—not shoelaces or a belt—when you "tie off" before injecting heroin.

Oozing from *Junkphood*'s pages was a sense of youthful exuberance, and plenty of in-your-face attitude. There was also a strong streak of something called "junkie pride." *Junkphood*'s manifesto, published on the first page of its first three issues, defined its defiant posture: "*The reason why we started this project is cause we are sick of being told what to do by the "experts." They give us information we have no use for and usually it is mixed up with messages about how we should quit using drugs cause drugs make us fucked up.*

Being a young injection drug user and asking for information, generally from adults, means that you have to put yourself lower than them, and admit you're a fucked up, ignorant kid. That's an ego-busting experience, it's terrible, and we won't do it. Instead of asking adults for help, we make up our own information and our own ethics. . . ."

EDNEY PUT A STACK of *Junkphood*s near the bucket at the needle exchange where addicts drop their syringes. Now, besides clean needles, young users also got free copies of *Junkphood*. The response was overwhelming. The junkies scrambled to read their friends' tales and make sure they got interviewed for the next issue. Among the squatters and drifters and homeless kids who flocked to the needle exchange, *Junkphood* created a sense of community. Willow, a 23-year-old *Junkphood* fan and regular at the needle exchange, says, "Reading stories about other people's experiences makes you feel not alone."

Edney discovered that *Junkphood* also boosted the young users' confidence. "The best thing that comes out of 'em is when someone you interview picks it up and sees their shit in print, and they're like, 'Wow, I said something that's worthy of printing,' " she says. "Most of the kids that we work with don't think anyone cares what they have to say."

Outside Santa Cruz, advocates of an approach to drug treatment called "harm reduction" took notice of *Junkphood*. Proponents of harm reduction argue that instead of launching a "war on drugs," the focus should be on reducing the harm caused by drug use. Needle exchanges, which give out clean syringes in order to prevent HIV transmission, put harm reduction principles into practice.

In the tight-knit community of harm reduction supporters, Edney was already relatively well known as director of one of the nation's only needle exchanges for young people. Now she was also *Junkphood*'s public face. Edney, who has a degree from the University of California at Santa Cruz, started giving presentations about *Junkphood* at drug policy conferences around the world. That Edney was now being embraced by the harm reduction community was ironic, considering that when she helped start the zine, she knew next to nothing about this movement. "*Junkphood* was created in a vacuum," she says. "We had no idea people would take it as seriously as they did."

Arriving at conferences with a suitcase stuffed with zines, Edney hawked *Junkphood* to professors, doctors, and other needle exchange activists. On the return flights, her suitcase was always lighter. *Junkphood* sold a lot of copies and won other activists' respect. "That the publications are clever, witty, and written by drug users means they'll have more impact than more generic publications," says Allan Clear, who started the needle exchange on the Lower East Side and now heads a nationwide coalition of harm reduction advocates. Robert Fullilove, an associate dean at the Columbia University School of Public Health, says, "They showed a real talent for ethnography. It's work that's literally without peer." The Lindesmith Center even began exporting *Junkphood* to Eastern Europe to be used in training sessions for activists who are setting up needle exchange programs.

Not everyone loved *Junkphood*, however. Some accused the zine of glamorizing drug use. Edney disagrees. "That's a very easy critique," she says. "You don't have to read it in order to say that. The stories are not sexy."

Junkphood not only raised Edney's profile, but it also propelled her out of the closet about her own experience with drugs. In all her years at the Santra Cruz Needle Exchange, Edney had never admitted her own use to other drug policy professionals. Finally, instead of pretending that *Junkphood* reflected the insights of *other* users, Edney began to talk about her own habit. She was articulate, professional, and carried a Macintosh Powerbook. But her black leather jacket hid the track marks on her arms, and the bumper sticker plastered on her car proclaimed *Junkphood's* motto: "Fuck Safe—Shoot Clean."

Despite *Junkphood*'s success, not all its founders were happy. Bowman and Edney had remained best friends, and were still shooting up together. But by the end of 1995, Bowman was dead. The cause of death: drug-induced suicide. Bowman was 25 years old.

ONE YEAR LATER, Edney and Lober put out the next issue of *Junkphood*. The title was "True Stories from Girl Junkies." There were still plenty of safer-injection tips and a no-apologies attitude. But *Junkphood*'s manifesto had been dropped. The zine's target audience—like the two surviving founders—was a little older. And *Junkphood* adopted a slightly more somber tone. The junkies' tales were more tragic, and more disturbing.

All of the stories belonged to female injectors, many of whom had used drugs for decades. These included Angela, a 47-year-old prostitute, who sells her services through newspaper ads. There was a homeless 18-year-old named Christina, who started using when she was 13 in order to forget her own abuse. Plus, there was Jessica, a 50-year-old with a long family history of amphetamine use, whose daughter died at age 22 from AIDS. And there was Twyla, whose mother supported her own drug habit by charging men to watch her have sex with another woman.

In "True Stories from Girl Junkies," these users delved into their love/hate relationships with drugs. Nothing is clear-cut, and the zine leaves plenty of room for the contradictions that define these women's lives. At one point, Angela says: "*I wish the guilt could be taken out of the drug . . . especially for young people coming up. But then again . . . I wouldn't like it if my son was doing coke. I would much rather that he doesn't have to walk in the footsteps that I did.*"

Junkphood's feminist twist on "junkie pride" is most evident in the issue's mini photo essay,

titled "Smack Back: Girls Teach Girls How To Fix." Crude black-and-white photographs show two young women—one covered with tattoos and both with their faces blacked out—shooting up. A caption explains: "These pictures and tips are not meant for girls who don't shoot dope, its for girls who do but who don't know how cause someone else is on the other end of their rigg."

Edney says that ignorance about how to inject can create a power imbalance in intimate relationships between users. Young women, dependent on their boyfriends for their next fix, often wind up trading sex for drugs. "Until I was about 23 or 24, my drug use was always controlled by the men I was in relationships with," says Edney, who is now 27 years old. "Once you learn how to do this, you don't need him."

"True Stories from Girl Junkies" reflects not only Edney's own empowerment, but the losses she has endured. Over the last 18 months, two more close friends have died from drug-related causes. Every few days, a needle exchange client staggers into her office, on the verge of overdosing. Edney no longer goes to the memorial service every time someone she knows passes away.

"My vision of drug use was totally romanticized four years ago, when my best friend hadn't killed himself and my girlfriend hadn't overdosed," says Edney, who is now more likely to smoke than inject heroin, thereby getting less high. "That's why the subject matter [of *Junkphood*] has changed and gotten more intense."

Though Lober, now 20, has spent the last two years in New York—dropping out of Sarah Lawrence College and moving to Harlem—she shares Edney's feeling that it is time for *Junkphood* to change. "It's not that I really want it to be depressing," Lober says. "But I just want to make sense out of our lives."

NOW EDNEY AND LOBER are rushing to finish the next two issues of *Junkphood*. This time around, the mood will be even darker. One of the issues, called "Getting Busted," will explore users' jail experiences. The other, "The Book of Death," will feature tales about overdosing and tributes to users who have died. The latest interviewees include few of the same people who were in the original *Junkphood* series. "Most are in correctional facilities or are not in contact anymore or they're too strung out to be bothered," Edney says.

Funding for the new *Junkphoods* comes from the sales of earlier issues plus *Junkphood* T-shirts, *Junkphood* magnets, and the needle exchange's leftover grant dollars. Lober and Edney hope that someday they will be able to get enough money to travel to other needle exchanges to collect stories and aggressively promote *Junkphood*.

But Edney is not sure how much longer she will be in Santa Cruz. Often, she thinks about trading her high-stress job for the chance to study public health, perhaps at Harvard University. Moving to the East Coast and no longer spending her days with junkies might make it easier to stop using drugs, Edney thinks. About her near-addiction, she says, "It's definitely a drain. It takes so much more from me than it gives to me at this point."

But despite all the chaos and tragedy that have shaped her life in recent years—and are reflected in *Junkphood*—Edney still preaches pride. "You have to be strong and pretty resilient and very resourceful to use drugs," she says. "I think it's okay to be a proud junkie." V

For copies of Junkphood, *contact the Santa Cruz Needle Exchange at 138 Younger Way, Santa Cruz, CA 95060 or 408-429-9489. E-mail: scnep@got.net*

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