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How Elton John redeemed self from a 'disgusting' past

(Now), I'm the luckiest person in the world and it's all because one young boy and his family showed me what they were doing was right and what I was doing was disgusting.

— Elton John, singer-songwriter

WASHINGTON: More than 20 years ago singer-songwriter Elton John was, by his own admission, living a disgusting life of self-pity and drug abuse. Then he met Ryan White.

White was an American teenager who in 1984 contracted the virus that causes AIDS through a blood transfusion due to his haemophilia. He was expelled from school because of fear of the disease and became a vocal advocate of HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention.

White died in April 1990 at the age of 18, but not before he had blazed a trail that would change the lives of thousands of people, and thousands more who came after his death, including the star piano player who befriended him.

"I used to sit in front of my CD player and listen ... and cry my eyes out, thinking, 'I'm a decent person, why can't I get well? Why can't I get better? I'm living the most disgusting life, I've no values anymore,'" John told *Reuters* in a recent interview.

"(Now), I'm the luckiest person in the world and it's all because one young boy and his family showed me what they were doing was right and what I was doing was disgusting."

John recently published his first book, 'Love Is the Cure: On Life, Loss, and the End of AIDS,' which is less autobiography and more an accounting of how far society and medicine have come in dealing with the disease and how

far they still have to go.

But the book does recount details of the 65-year-old performer's own life and his addiction to cocaine and alcohol. He said the overall theme is of salvation — his, as well as that of others whose worlds can be changed with a little compassion.

John has recorded mega-hits like 'Candle in the Wind,' won Grammys, an Oscar and a Tony. But he said White, his mother and sister had a more profound impact on him than musical glory.

When he first met the Whites, John saw a group of people who should be angry because Ryan White had been ostracised for contracting the disease through a blood transfusion. Yet the teen and his family were just the opposite, giving their time and energy to help others with the disease.

"What was completely chiselled in my soul, was: 'You're leading a terrible life. You are a disgusting person,'" John said of himself. "I had no self-esteem whatsoever. I looked at Ryan; I looked at me, and the difference was a billion miles."

So John changed. By his own admission, he got clean and sober and has now been in a 19-year relationship with partner David Furnish, with whom he is raising a son, while continuing to perform around the world.

The British singer also became a vocal advocate for AIDS victims. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Elton John

AIDS Foundation, which has raised and donated US\$275 million to hundreds of projects focusing on those at risk and marginalised in 55 countries.

John was a featured speaker at last month's International AIDS Conference in Washington, where researchers sounded hopeful that a vaccine was within reach.

Thanks to drugs that can control the virus, healthcare providers and people living with AIDS are better-equipped to battle the disease. New infections have fallen by 21 per cent since the pandemic's peak in 1997 and advances in prevention promise to cut that rate even more. Still, as many as 34 million people worldwide are infected with the human immunodeficiency virus.

John is quick to say he does not know much about the science or research into HIV/AIDS. What he does know is how it affects people who continue to be stigmatised by it, and how becoming involved helped to redeem him.

"I could drop dead tomorrow and I would die a happy man because I have had my redemption. I can be proud of myself now, and God knows I wasn't in the past, and that's the terrible thing about addiction," he said.

"Three words changed my life: 'I need help.' ... There are some things in life that you cannot do on your own. It's much better to share and to reach out. I learned that lesson," John said. — *Reuters*

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CHANGED: John performs during a concert as part of his 'Greatest Hits Live 2012' world tour at the Ondrej Nepela Arena in Bratislava, Slovakia last month. — Reuters file photo