

"A need to make a difference" Steve Fulmer and the men and women of CHES/PAL Project:

by Pat Scott

Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian. . . . There is another religion, not designated by pious garb or complicated rites, not backed by presidential administration. It's called simply Human Compassion, "the need to make a difference" in the human condition. And it is in this most basic sense that Steve Fulmer and the men and women of CHES/PAL Project are "religious."

CHES/PAL Project was created to provide the down-to-earth, practical support and emotional buoying up needed in particular by persons living with AIDS: those with the disease, their families, loved ones, and friends. (CHES) Community Health & Essential Support Services

The "Community" is ours: lesbians and gay men living in the Portland area, and their extended families.

The "Health" of the clients and friends of CHES/PAL is changed, challenged, life-threatening. They are persons touched by AIDS, ARC (AIDS Related Complex), stroke, malignant cancer, disabling accident.

The "Essential Support Services" are as basic as transportation, housekeeping and shopping. Referral services — help in locating financial, medical, legal and professional counseling assistance — are available. And emotional support is provided through CHES/PAL Project as well: a shoulder, someone who knows, someone who cares, a friend.

(PAL) Personal Active Listener

A young man is suddenly faced with having AIDS, ARC, or his test shows positive antibodies. Suddenly he is almost unbearably alone. Who to tell? Who to confide in? What lies ahead? The PAL Project volunteers are there to help, to listen.

The spouse of a man with AIDS has worked hard, has been supportive, loving; but the stress is wearing him down. Difficulties escalate during an 8-month, 9-month, year, two-year period. A PAL Project volunteer is there again. Someone who knows, who cares, who listens . . . a friend. In some cases, the only friend.

And other basic supports are being developed through PAL Project: Food (The Casserole Brigade — to regularly furnish casseroles and stocky soups to homebound clients) and Housing (The Housing Project — hoping to secure and manage low-cost rental housing units for those unable to find suitable shelter within their means). A coordinator is needed, and more volunteers — and, of course, money. (Can you help?) Steve Fulmer has been the force behind

CHES and the PAL Project. He admits to being "a builder, a starter, an initiator." He's organized, efficient a mover and a shaker in a real sense. As he talks of his work the words "Kaposi's sarcoma, Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia, opportunistic infections" are spoken as easily and familiarly as monosyllables. He knows his subject, which is AIDS, and his business.

When pushed to clarify what it is that he does exactly, the answer sounds like a course in Public or Business Administration and cause enough for a heart attack.

"I'm a principle communicator for the work; I chair the board; I prepare the agendas; I write large portion of the external communications; I'm playing a principle role in a fund-raising project we're doing February 28, Performing Artists for Life. I'm on the board of that group; I'm the principle AIDS organization representative. I sit on the Citizens Advisory Board for County Human Services to make sure that AIDS gets its slice of the social service pie. I've written all four of the major grants submitted. I did the lobbying and speaking for the \$30,000 we just got through the Board of Commissioners. . . ."

But this listing of agendas and contacts is not all that comprises CHES/PAL, its volunteers, staff, or Steve Fulmer.

Chester/Esther Brinker was one of the first people in the Portland community (and certainly the best known) to contract AIDS. "That's what brought it home to me," remembers Fulmer, "that people were dying without any support from the gay community. Not only were they not getting any support from the government, but they weren't even getting support from their friends."

This is when things began to move and shake.

Largely under Fulmer's instigation, proceeds from a concert by the Portland Gay Men's Chorus were offered to Cascade AIDS Project, exclusively to found a service organization. (CAP itself is involved solely in education and the prevention of AIDS.) \$2300 was raised "and the meetings began," Fulmer says.

CHES/PAL Project began services as a separate organization in June of 1985. Since that time they have "provided direct service to more than 300 persons, used more than

17,000 volunteer hours, supplied an additional 10,000 hours in volunteered administrative support, managed more 200 fully active volunteers, directed more than \$150,000 in in-kind contributions, collected over \$20,000 in public contributions" as well as produced brochures and newsletters, submitted grant proposals, and spoken before numerous organizations and individuals.

Facts are cold. The people involved, however, are not.

Beneath the organized, efficient exterior; beneath the numbers and the statistics is the motivation. "The pitch we're giving government agencies is that practical support can save them money: 'You can't afford to not support us.' But our volunteers and the people who've put in tens of thousands of planning hours to make this project function didn't do it to save the damned government a dime. The motivation for the people involved is strictly human compassion; providing people with affection, not rejection."

It's not easy. Fulmer has seen friends die, is supportive of others who are now living with the challenge of AIDS. Hard work and stress are things Fulmer has lived with before but the grief — the loss of friends, handling "the anticipatory grief of my friends still living with AIDS" — this is a terrible new lesson. He deals with it, with the help of his spouse, his friends, the courage and optimism of those living with AIDS. One foot in front of the other, Fulmer and his associates keep on. "It's what there is to do," he says pragmatically.

Still, everyone can experience burn-out and Fulmer will step back soon, still keeping a hand in the Project, still being involved in the Chorus, but retreating just a little. His friends don't think he can do it, just be a regular guy without all of his calendar filled. Fulmer thinks otherwise. He does admit, however, that doing nothing can't last for too long.

"Something will come along that's just made for me. Where I feel I can make a difference. That's what I enjoy doing . . . making a difference in the lives of my friends."

And Fulmer and his people have an important message they'd like to get across. "AIDS is not spread by casual contact: Hugging does not cause AIDS. And ignoring the problem doesn't make it go away."

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