

Ruby House: opening doors and minds

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BY BILLY RUSSO

In addition to providing housing for people disabled by HIV, commonly known as AIDS, Ruby House has affected the attitudes of people in the rural community of Roseburg. It has placed the local homophile community in a position of leadership and serves as a vehicle for addressing homophobia as well as this dreaded epidemic. By its existence Ruby House establishes common ground for the non-gay and the gay and lesbian communities to work together.



The Roseburg Report

Last month we invited a sociology class that was studying AIDS as a term project to visit Ruby House. A father who lost his son to AIDS, two gay men with AIDS and myself participated in the four-hour presentation. Many of the college students had never knowingly met a gay person. All but one had never met anybody with AIDS. At the close of the afternoon we challenged the class to address homophobia and fear of AIDS in the future by admitting to their fearful friends and relatives that they have met gay people and people with AIDS and by sharing what they had learned.

The local television station, KPIC, agreed to produce and air a series of public-service announcements about Ruby House. Six or eight times a day local viewers have been exposed to a one-minute spot introducing them to a dozen persons who volunteer at the home. To our knowledge this is the first locally produced AIDS PSA to be aired in Oregon. A second PSA is in the planning stage.

Two lawyers and Le Joi restaurant hosted an evening at the house for local progressives. Although only 20 out of 200 accepted the invitation, they left more than \$700 in contributions. Fifteen enthusiastic volunteers were on hand to show people around and to discuss our project.

These progressive people normally do not support projects that are initiated by gays and lesbians, and for most of them it was a first.

More than 100 local professionals, clergy and community leaders turned out for an open house in May. In addition to healthcare professionals, we invited the staffs of county, state and federal agencies, religious and civic leaders, and community activists. Over the last few months many of them have revisited the residence and offered their support. Some donated much-needed supplies and furniture, others gave time and money.

A Brownie troop from a nearby town recently has discussed making Ruby House its troop project. By the time this paper goes to press, I'm optimistic we'll have interfaced with these young women and be on our way to merging with this traditional element of the community.

Direct care has also played an important role in effecting social change. Although our first resident, a man with stage-three HIV disease (formerly known as ARC), moved in the week we took possession of the home, we didn't receive our first critically ill resident until the middle of June. He was close to the end of his life when he arrived in the Roseburg area with his loving family.

Our volunteer program proved more than adequate in meeting the needs of this family. The 20 or so persons who gave their time and energy included half a dozen RNs from local institutions, homemakers, musicians, clergy, a physical therapist, a lawyer, as well as many in the gay and lesbian community.

In accompanying this man to death's door, our community expanded beyond gays and lesbians to include an equal number of non-gays, people who by providing loving care got their first glimpse through the gay window.

Having a resident here also created common ground on which to establish relationships with local businesses and institutions. Since Ruby House is situated in the town in which I live, the town in which I ran for the school board as an openly gay candidate advocating AIDS education, I know many of the people here. Certainly most of them know who I am: almost 7 percent of them voted for me.

We have also developed a good working relationship with the local paramedics, pharmacy, supermarket, mortuary and police department, all of which are less than a mile away. Even our ten-year-old paperboy expresses his support for Ruby House. He often visits with us, introducing us to his young friends.

A local official best summed up the general response to Ruby House when he dropped by with the chief of police. He told me that he was proud that I thought the residents of this small town were caring enough to accept a home like this in their midst.

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