

Paul Starr: In the eye of the storm

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BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

AIDS came into Paul Starr's life the way it entered a lot of lives in the mid-1980s. A friend, a good friend, was diagnosed. Suddenly the disease was no longer just a newspaper story, an abstract.

Starr did what came naturally, viscerally, to him. He found a way to act. "I'm the kind of person who has a very hard time not being able to respond on some large level to the disease," he says now.

Profile

Recruited by some friends into the fledgling PAL Program, he soon began work as in-home care coordinator at one of the organizations that later merged into Cascade AIDS Project. At the same time, he was earning his master's degree in social work at Portland State University.

Since then, Starr has served as social worker to CAP clients, led support groups, worked with the PAL Program and been CAP's client services coordinator. As of last month, Starr is again doing what comes naturally, viscerally. Responding on the larger level as executive director of CAP, the largest AIDS education and service organization in the state.

In his first official week as head of CAP, the shift in title seemed more an affirmation than a change. Starr still appears a bit tentative in the office that recently became "his"; he has just begun to unpack cartons and hang pictures on the walls.

Starr speaks quietly, modestly, his eyes steady behind frameless aviator glasses. Dressed in khakis and a white button-down shirt, he resembles the intent kid in the middle of the college classroom, the one who didn't say much, but when he did, said it passionately and well. If he has a zany side, perhaps it is still packed in a carton on the floor of the new office.

Starr's vision of the executive director's job comes from doing time on the front lines of AIDS work since February 1986. After four years, he knows there is plenty to be angry about. But angry is not what he wants to be.

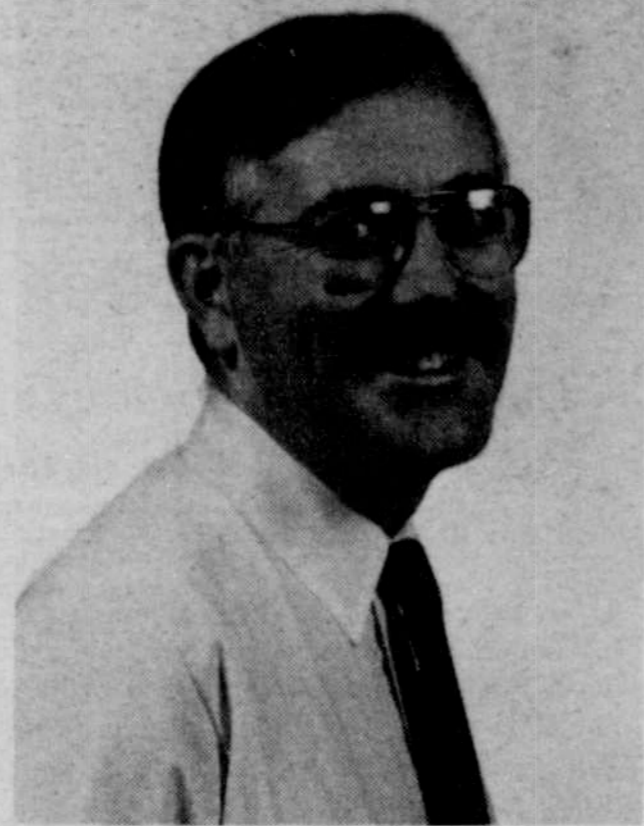
The metaphor guiding Starr is the one about calm at the center of the storm. His models are people who struggle, who overcome tremendous odds, without becoming bitter. Now that he is at the helm of CAP, those are the voices he hears.

"In 1985 a real close friend of mine was diagnosed with AIDS. He was one of the early folks in the state, maybe 12th or 13th. It really shook my life up a bit. AIDS had finally arrived in my world, as opposed to being in the papers.

"So I needed to do something; I needed to act.

"Some friends of mine recruited me to be one of the early PALs. I was matched up with the lover of someone who was diagnosed. That was a very wonderful experience for me in terms of helping me get through my own initial fears and denials around the disease.

"One of the things that's really strong for me — and has been even before AIDS — is a commitment to helping people voice their own needs and find their own power. That's part of what I tried to do in client services. To create a structure that didn't just take over



people's lives, that didn't just treat people as if they were helpless.

"We get a whole mix of people coming for assistance. Some people are very clear about what they want and need and don't want any intrusion beyond that into their lives. Some of them need some help figuring out how to deal with this disease, what's appropriate to get from an agency and what's more appropriate to get someplace else in the community.

"Some folks want an agency to take over their lives. They want to be mothered, they want to be very passive. Those are the folks you really have to set limits with — to say, yes, we're there to help you, but we're not there to take over your life.

"Our requests for help are just going through the ceiling — people want someone to come in and help them clean or cook or give them rides to the doctor. Or people whose lovers are at work, so they're alone all day, and they really can't be alone. So they need someone there all day long, 40 hours a week. That is a real need people have. Unfortunately, we can't meet that need except on special occasions, where there's lots of community support.

"Something I think every staff person here goes through is that the jobs very quickly expand much beyond any human being's capacity. Because the need is so huge. I've watched myself and others come here and go through this process. At first you come here and you have so much energy, and you really want to help. People don't come to work here unless they're really doing it from their gut.

"Then you start seeing your job expanding around you, you start seeing all the incredible needs that are there. You go through a period where it's too much, it's overwhelming. There's a lot of guilt, sometimes, about not being able to meet the needs that you see.

"And then, hopefully, you get to a point where you kind of pull back and begin to accept your own limitations. You begin to understand that Cascade AIDS Project can't take care of AIDS in Portland. It can do pieces of it; you can take care of pieces of people's needs. But you won't be able to heal it; you won't be able to cure it. You won't be able to stop people from dying.

"In client services it's really hard because you know that if you don't take care of it, someone will be in pain. Someone's life will be worse because you can't take care of it.

"We have an active caseload now of over 200 people. Any one of those 200 people can call at any time and request help. In a lot of ways it's an overwhelming task.

"As coordinator of the client services department, it was a real concern of mine — wanting the staff to push themselves as far as they could to meet the needs and respond to the clients and protecting those staff people from emotional distress and burn-out.

"I think right now the morale of the staff is really high. It feels really good to work here. There have been times working here when it's felt that it was just beyond us. But it doesn't feel like that now.

"One of the things I've tried to do is to look at each person's job, at what are the priorities in that job and what is a realistic expectation for what one person can do. I've tried to really pare down job descriptions so we can focus on the real priorities.

"Another thing I can do is help look at what we'll need to be doing down the road. There's lots and lots of talk about who CAP serves and what we should be doing. It's clear to me and, I think, to most staff here, that we're not as accessible and responsive as we should be to people who are HIV-positive or diagnosed and who are of minorities.

"As far as I'm concerned, anyone whose life has been affected by this disease deserves to be supported and helped in any way that we can. That is, regardless of sexual orientation, regardless of race, regardless of sex. We need to be available and accessible to people.

"I think it would be really unfortunate if people in this community who are really struggling and isolated because of this disease could not come here and get what they needed. So that's what we're trying to look at over time: What do we need to do to make sure that anyone with HIV disease can come here and get as much as we have to offer? That might not mean creating additional services here, but helping other people create services in their own communities.

"I love the people I work with. We do a lot of talking here among each other. If people look at you and see that you're really dragging, that you're depressed or angry or whatever, there's a lot of support here for getting it out or for getting away from here and setting limits.

"The other thing I do is meditate. I spent a few years back in the '70s learning meditation. I actually lived in a monastery for a while, and that process of taking some time to be by myself, being completely still and refocusing my attention and my energy has been really valuable for me.

"I don't think that I have role models. I've had some heroes in the past, and they tend to be people who have really fought hard to overcome prejudice and discrimination and money issues and all that kind of stuff and have come out in such a way that their voice is strong and clear.

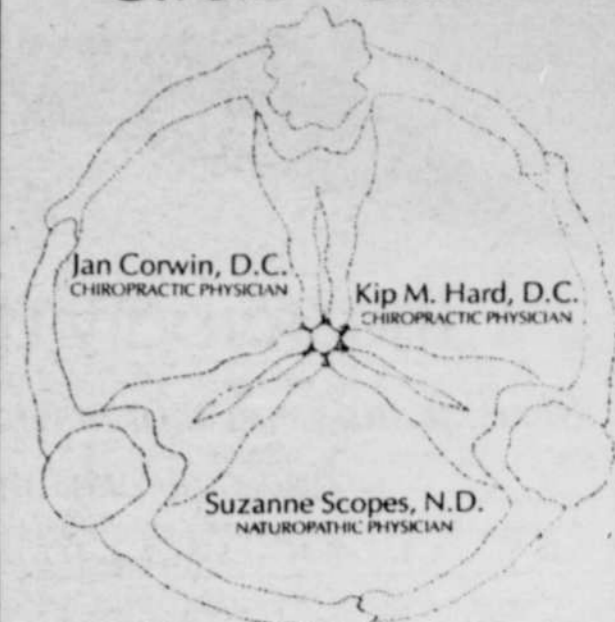
"They're also able to do that in a way that still has a very strong message of respect for other people and appreciation for life. To go through all that struggle and find yourself and not be bitter — those are the kind of people I really respect a lot.

"I had to think really long and hard about taking this job. I've worked in the gay community long enough to know how hard it is to do. There are such intense emotions involved in this work, and such real anger, in a lot of ways, for so many of us. Anger about this disease, anger about what we go through in our lives just to be gay, let alone to survive AIDS and everything else.

"I want to be somebody who really hears what other people have to say about their anger or their pain or their joy. And I want to be able to respond to that in a way that helps without getting myself in a situation of being angry and bitter and feeling like I'm boxed in.

"That's one reason why I wanted the job. Because I want that challenge. I want to see if there's some way to do it, to be in a leadership role in the middle of the incredible amount of turmoil that this disease creates and maintain a real sense of integrity and purpose and peace, all at the same time." ▼

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