

## John Forsgren: Artist, AIDS activist

*One of the basic ideas about Art/AIDS was to broaden the opportunities for people to be involved in issues surrounding AIDS*

BY ALAN SCALLY

Art/AIDS, a collaborative effort of Portland's art, theater and literary community, will again be presented sometime in 1990. Focusing attention on AIDS through the sale of donated art works in participating galleries, readings of selected theatrical and literary pieces, and the display of writings on a Wall of Manifestos, the event has been a consciousness-raiser as well as a fund-raiser in the two years (1987 and 1989) it has been presented.

### Profile

However, some in the gay community have criticized the event, especially the 1989 version, to the extent that one of the founders of Art/AIDS felt obliged to respond.

"There was some criticism of the 1989 Art/AIDS benefit because we didn't use the word gay, that somehow we avoided the issue of gay people being affected or involved. We weren't trying to avoid," John Forsgren, Art/AIDS coordinator said emphatically. "We were trying to involve other people."

"I'm part of the gay community and I identify with it very strongly," Forsgren said emotionally. "We didn't want to prevent other gay people from getting involved and we didn't. They were involved as artists rather than just being a gay person."

"I'm not a closeted person," Forsgren said, "None of us on the committee [coordinating committee] are, but there were other persons on the committee who are straight people."

The planning process for Art/AIDS 1990 will be in the germinal stages by press date, with the coordinating committee having met to begin the organizing. The week or so of events will encompass, as in the past, music, visual arts, theater, lecture, films and literature.

Besides coordinator John Forsgren, the other founders of the project in 1987 were gallery owner William Jamison, visual artist Larry Kirkland and M.D. Jim Sampson. Sampson talked to Forsgren at that time about what the arts community could do. They had the idea of basing the event on Art Against AIDS in New York City.

"The emphasis was originally on visual arts," Forsgren said. "Then we brought in Theresa Jordan who's a writer. So, the other parts of the art community became involved."

"The initial part was developed by William [Jamison] thinking we could develop First Thursday and the Gallery Walk and that sort of thing. Since then it's expanded into other parts of the arts and we want that to continue to happen."

The first year, art galleries put the organizers in touch with artists who donated art whose sale would help start a fund for an HIV day care center.

But, says Forsgren: "It wasn't so much to raise money as to give artists a way to get

involved." Then the Portland theatrical community also became involved. Song, dramatic monologues and comedy were presented by 12 of Portland's finest actors.

"There were pieces about loss and grief, and pieces about embracing life."

Cup of tea in hand, Forsgren sat in his design studio five floors up in a converted warehouse near Northwest 18th and Upshur. A view of the Fremont Bridge and the Willamette River almost made up for the excruciating climb up the unforgiving stairs. Forsgren discussed his experiences during the first two Art/AIDS, and his hopes for the upcoming 1990 version.

"One of the basic ideas about Art/AIDS was to broaden the opportunities for people to be involved in issues surrounding AIDS. Art/AIDS has affected me in that I found out how many people outside the gay community are affected by AIDS. They had no way of addressing their fear or their concern or their loss."



PHOTO BY JAY BROWN

"If you're not gay, you probably have a brother, a son, a father, a sister, a mother, or a friend who is. We wanted people to look at people in a broader way and see the loss of what's going on. We wanted them to find a way to identify outside of the sexual."

The Wall of Manifestos was a display of poems and writings relating to the concerns raised by Art/AIDS. Some pieces written by well-known authors, some by people like a woman who deeply affected Forsgren.

"There was one mother who wanted to submit a poem for the Wall of Manifestos, but she wanted it to be anonymous. She didn't want her boss to know that her son had died of AIDS. It was a horrible situation. She had no way to express her grief."

"She wrote the piece and was contacted by a local weekly publication about printing it. She agreed to have her name used. In essence, she came out and was able to discuss her grief. And that to me was incredible."

John Forsgren represents a level of commitment that is hard to find in any community, gay or straight. The blond, bespectacled, soft-spoken designer greets a visitor in a studio with blueprints and design sketches pinned to walls, covering drafting tables and rolled neatly on shelves. He discussed his life and career.

"I'm an architect by training. I do some architectural design, some material design such as light fixtures. I also do some commission glass work, some sand-blasting projects. You could classify it as architecturally-related design work."

"I move between architecture and interiors, between design and art, I kind of specialize in the gray area."

Born in Grants Pass, Forsgren graduated with an architectural degree from the University of Oregon. He moved up I-5 to Portland in the late '70s.

Forsgren worked for an interior planning and design firm until the recession of 1982 forced a layoff. That's when he started to work for himself, and he hasn't looked back.

"I started out with a show of my work at Nob Hill Motors, where they sold used BMW's and Mercedes. It was a great showroom and it seemed a lark to see art and cars. From that show I got commissions and I began this segment of my career."

Art/AIDS has brought Forsgren into the spotlight in the gay community, and the exposure has resulted in brickbats from some gay people, as well as praise and appreciation from both straight and gay participants. One of the problems Forsgren and his fellow committee members faced was fundraising.

"Part of the thing we realized was that it was difficult to raise money for AIDS. We wanted to develop avenues for people who are in the big money-giving community to give money to AIDS, rather than have fundraising be isolated to the gay community."

"Funding is still limited by the fear of gay people. We allow people to become involved. You have to get people onto the learning curve, and that's really hard."

"We saw how the art community, the art-buying, the art-collecting community, the art-selling community in many other cities are major contributors to AIDS related causes. That's how we began development, making inroads into that segment of the community."

Forsgren sees Art/AIDS as a means of raising consciousness as well as funds. In that regard, having Fran Leibowitz speak at the 1989 event epitomized the spirit of Art/AIDS.

"She came specifically for the event. She was on our early short list. She gave us a wonderful donation in addition to speaking. She spoke at two other events to promote her event."

The visitor and Forsgren talked briefly about Leibowitz' essay, "The Effect of AIDS on The Artistic Community in New York City." Forsgren then spoke in his soft manner of the impact AIDS has had on his own life.

"AIDS has changed my own life dramatically. A lot of my life is focused around it. A lot of the gay community has friends who have died and who are sick."

"As far as Art/AIDS goes, the attitude had been that it is gay people who are sick, so only gay people should be involved. A woman I was talking to asked me, 'Isn't this really the gay community's job to do this?'"

"And my response is 'Don't deny me the rest of who I am,'" Forsgren said with deep-felt emotion. "I am a gay person but I'm also a son, and a lover, and I am a professional and a friend."

"All of those things are a part of who I am, just as they're a part of who everybody else is. Just because I happen to be gay doesn't eliminate the other things I am. Don't deny me the rest of who I am if you're not gay. Don't deny the human bond between us."

Amen. ▽



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