

CAP's Chris Smith

Turning to Mica, the invisible kid

BY ANDDEE HOCHMAN

Last year, on his 36th birthday, Chris Smith gave himself a new name. A new old name. There's a story behind it. He'll tell you if you ask.

Smith, the interim chair of the Cascade AIDS Project, sits at la Patisserie, catching a small respite after a morning management meeting. Next he'll head to the Golden West Hotel, where he works as director of the Bridgeview Community, a residence for adults

Profile

with a history of homelessness and mental illness.

Smith's face is slightly ruddy from the summer's first sunshine. He wears casual gray pants, a peach camp-shirt, an amethyst crystal on a chain around his neck, a woven bracelet on one wrist. Some people dress for the setting, some from the soul. There is no doubt to which group Smith belongs.

His conversation travels the quieter back roads, not the bustling interstates. He talks about CAP and its mission, about moving to Portland from Denver 11 years ago, about finding his way to people-oriented work. Before becoming director of Bridgeview, he worked as a case manager for Mental Health Services West. There is nothing guarded in Smith's manner, in his laugh.

He tells his story casually, like a handkerchief unfurling from a pocket, relaxed and easy, all the creases familiar. A series of events and choices have brought Mica Smith to this name and place and time, and it is absolutely the right setting, and he is pleased to be in it.

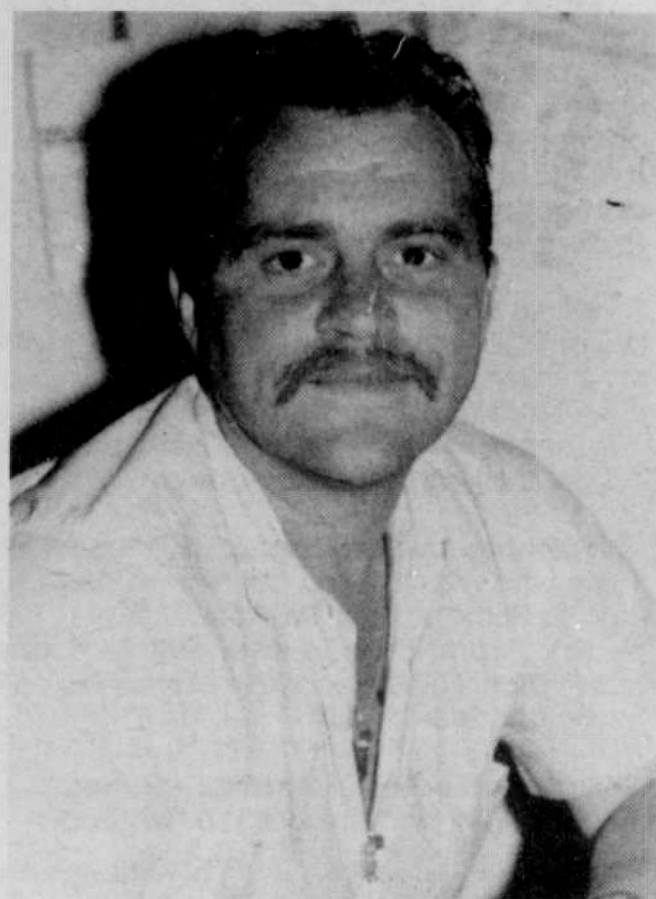
"I've been on the CAP board for five years and I've been a PAL for six years. Before CAP there was an organization called CHES—Community Health and Essential Support Services. As the transition (to CAP) started to happen, I thought one of the ways I might be useful was to be on the board. I really wanted to become more involved in the decision-making processes.

"I'm a pretty good nurturer and caretaker and fixer and all those things. So part of (My involvement with CAP) feeds into that. But a bigger part of me feels that this is really important stuff.

"Before I became chair of the board (in January), I had decided that enough was enough and I needed to take some time away. That was in the middle of a time when the board was going through a big process of change. The board at that time felt like a really difficult place to be.

"But when we got new energy on the board, I remember coming to the next meeting and thinking, 'This is how it should feel. Maybe I can stick it out.'"

"I feel proud of this organization. The people who work here are incredibly committed. When I see them in the community and I hear people talk about the work they're doing, it makes me feel like we're really doing



something meaningful.

"Not that we're perfect. We have holes in our service system, holes in what we can and can't do. (We've had to) learn very quickly how to grow from being a grass-roots organization to a sophisticated, recognized force in this community.

"We certainly have responded to the gay men's community. I don't think we have responded as well to the people-of-color communities or to the women's community. That's partly (due to) management of resources, management of where the disease hits the hardest.

"We're going to have to struggle with how we are going to provide the most effective, meaningful array of services to the group of people who need it the most. At first, we felt the organization should respond mostly to people who have AIDS. Very quickly we found out that there were lovers who were in need, and mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers—a whole network of people.

"My favorite place to be (at CAP) will always be as a PAL. That's where my heart really lies. I've had amazing gifts come to me through PAL.

"Part of that experience is learning about what it's like to be an open person who is able to hear what people are saying underneath their words. In traditional mental health work, often that way of finding connectedness is really lost. It's lost in the jargon, the bureaucracy, the psycho-babble.

"I've tried to take that back to my work at Bridgeview, not only in supervising the staff but also in dealing with the residents.

"I'm from Denver. That's where I did my Wonder-Bread years. I had come here a couple years in a row to visit a friend who was going to Lewis and Clark. Coming from that high, dry area into this lush greenness was like a little bit of heaven. It never rained once while I was here on vacation, and I didn't translate why it was so green until I'd moved here!

"I tried to leave once, when I was about 29 and went on vacation to Hawaii. All of a sudden the romance of the weather and the tropics really swept me away. So I quit my job

and sold all my belongings and moved to Hawaii. I came back. I came back for good. This really feels like home to me.

"I've had a myriad of other jobs, I was a soda jerk for awhile, and I worked in a credit bureau with computers. When I came to Oregon, I decided I wanted to do something completely different, so I worked in a real estate department for one of the banks here. It was awful, completely awful.

"Both my parents really influenced me. My father started out his career as a Methodist minister and moved from there into social work. He worked as a counselor for the Big Brother program in Denver. My mother has been a teacher for a number of years. So both my parents have this kind of helper bent.

"Growing up as a kid, our house was the house where the neighborhood gathered. It drew those who were troubled or were having problems at home. We always seemed to have somebody who needed a little love and support. I was the one who had the shoulder to cry on. I'm pretty convinced it's one of those gifts I have and that it makes sense for me to be here.

"I'm not very good at following my own advice—reaching out to my friends and family to say, 'I need your shoulder' or 'I need somebody to take care of me for a little while because I'm feeling stressed out.' But I'm getting better at that. I do a fair amount of writing. Sometimes it's a journal; sometimes a short story or poetry; sometimes just a process of putting down whatever's going on in my head. I spend a part of each day in some kind of meditation, which often involves a lot of creative visualization.

"I found out that I was HIV-positive about three years ago. Prior to that, for two-and-a-half years I had been facilitating an HIV support group for CAP. My approach to the people in this group was (to say), 'We have power over wellness and over illness.'

"But there was always this little... twinge or something between me and the group because I had not been tested, so one of the things I got from finding out that I was positive myself was: 'Put up or shut up... Do you really believe this?' And I do.

"Now what I'm trying to do is develop a sense of community for myself, sort of like my extended family. I have tons of really good friends, but somehow I'm wanting it to feel a little more organized or formal.

"There's a story behind (my name). When I was about six my mom told me how they came to name me. They had decided that if I was a boy they were going to name me Corey. And my mother's mother said that if they named me Corey she would disown me and not acknowledge me as a grandson, that I had to be named Jerome. Somehow Christopher was a compromise between those two.

"But in my six-year-old little brain I got real angry. I was mad at my parents for not sticking to their belief. So I had this invisible playmate whose name was Mica. We kind of became one. I used Chris until I moved to Oregon, and for some reason, on my birthday last year it became clear to me that I needed to re-establish who I really feel like.

"It's been an interesting process because most people in Oregon know me as Chris. I'm in a name warp. I still respond to both. They have really different feelings for me.

"There's something warm about that name (Mica), kind of a magic about it. I think that has to do with this invisible kid."



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