

## WORKING TOGETHER

## Filling a need

Corey Baker of Friends of People with AIDS finds eager recipients in Mexico for surplus medical supplies

by Inga Sorensen

What began two years ago as a vacation to Guadalajara, Mexico, Portland's sister city, has transformed into an ongoing commitment to assist residents there who are living with AIDS.

Not surprisingly, that effort is being led by Corey Baker, founder of the Portland-based Friends of People with AIDS Foundation, a non-profit organization that assists people with AIDS with their everyday and emergency needs.

During his trip, Baker visited the AIDS ward in the Guadalajara civic hospital and was unnerved by what he witnessed.

"It was very clean, but they had absolutely no medical supplies. People were dying on stretchers because there weren't enough hospital beds," explains Baker, 65, a retired state employee who established the foundation a few years ago after suffering a heart attack—a dire circumstance that prompted him to take a closer look at his life.

Baker ultimately concluded he wanted to help people in need, specifically those living with HIV and AIDS, hence the creation of the Friends of People with AIDS Foundation, which relies on grants and its two annual fund-raisers—a benefit dog walk held each July and an October luncheon auction.

The money raised supports a variety of foundation funds, including a travel fund, which is designed to cover the expenses involved in bringing family and loved ones to visit those living out their final days; a cremation fund, to help pay for cremation services for people who have died of



PHOTO BY LINDA KUEMER

AIDS complications; an emergency food fund, which provides emergency food baskets to those in need; a fund geared toward the care of pets owned by people with HIV and AIDS (who may be living on a limited budget); and an entertainment fund, which allows the organization to sponsor a Thanksgiving dinner, as well as purchase Easter baskets and Christmas toys for children.

Over the years Baker has managed to collect a

stock of medical supplies that has gone unused—boxes of diapers, rubber gloves, hospital beds and walkers, and thermometers, to name a few.

He says the supplies have piled up because state law prohibits the unused portion of medical supplies, as well as drugs, purchased for a patient who dies, from being passed on to another.

"So I have all of this excess," Baker says. "When I was in Guadalajara I thought, 'I have lots

of supplies back home that are going unused—let's see if I can get them here.' ... I have enough walkers to walk all of China," says Baker, stressing that needy folks in this country who approach the foundation for assistance do not go without.

"These are supplies that I have lots of, or supplies that can't be given away," Baker says, adding he is paying for the Guadalajara project out of his own pocket.

Donations, however, are appreciated.

"It costs \$71 in postage just to send down one computer-box size of supplies, and they really do need so much," he says. "I mean they have one rickety wheelchair for AIDS patients. In big letters on the back of it they scrawled 'SIDA' [AIDS]. I asked why they did that, and they said if they didn't, the wheelchair would be taken and used in another ward. When it says 'SIDA,' other wards won't touch it. The doctor didn't even have a blood pressure cuff. I went out and bought one for him."

Baker says after making his way through the bureaucratic red tape, the Mexican government has given him the OK to ship medical supplies to the hospital, which also plans to send a freight car for him to fill.

"We're hoping to have it filled and returned within the next three months," he says.

Baker also hopes to have his first box of medical supplies sent south by mid-December. "That's my hope," he says. "Clearly, the sooner the better."

*Those who wish to donate money or medical supplies to the Friends of People with AIDS Foundation may call Baker at 245-7428.*

## Playing for both sides

Mexican and U.S. AIDS groups play volleyball over border fence to demonstrate that the virus ignores such boundaries

by Rex Wockner

AIDS groups from San Diego and Tijuana played a game of volleyball on Dec. 1, World AIDS Day, using the infamous border fence as the net. The novel idea resulted in heavy local media coverage of World AIDS Day events.

Participants on the U.S. side were in Border Field State Park, while the Mexicans played from Playas de Tijuana (Tijuana Beach), an ocean-front neighborhood known for its bullring. Remote Border Field State Park sees few visitors: It is unsightly, polluted (by Mexican sewage), open only four days a week and accessible only by dirt road. The nearest border crossing point is several miles east, so the players could only peer at each other through the fence.

The U.S. team was organized by the HIV/STD Committee of the California/Baja California Binational Health Council, an arm of the United States-Mexico Border Health Association. The Mexican group was pulled together by the gay-community-based Organización SIDA Tijuana (OST) and

COMUSIDA, the Municipal AIDS Committee.

The U.S. players brought along a theater troupe, and the Mexican players brought a rock band.

The volleyball game "represent[ed] the transmission of HIV/AIDS in this border region," organizers said.

Officially, San Diego has many more AIDS cases than Tijuana, but Tijuana's numbers are known to be inaccurate. The cities are similar in size, with over 1.1 million residents each. However, the situation for people infected with HIV is far more serious on the Mexican side of the fence.

"One of our biggest concerns on the Mexican side is that we do not have laws protecting the rights of people with AIDS," said OST founder Emilio Velásquez, who thought up the volleyball gimmick.



"It makes it a disease that is hidden away from epidemiological reports. The numbers you see on this side of the border are not realistic, because people are in hiding and in fear of losing their jobs and housing."

"Discrimination is rampant," Velásquez said. "You have to be tested to get a job, to get married, to go to schools. And nobody is doing anything to fight it.... There's no budget for AIDS for this whole state, even though we have the

highest per capita rate in all of Mexico. The state AIDS office consists of a desk in [the state capital of] Mexicali. That's it.... The PAN [National Action Party], because of their moral right-wing conservative attitudes, couldn't care less."

(The PAN is the most conservative of Mexico's three main political parties and is in power both in

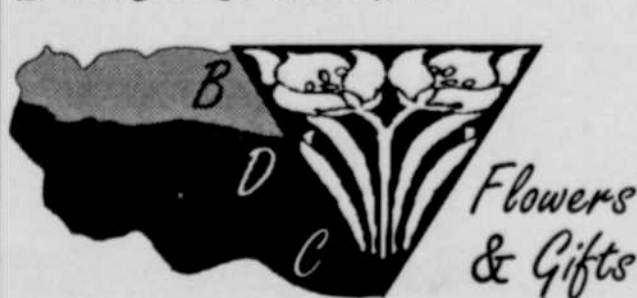
Tijuana and Baja California state. The less conservative but more corrupt PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party, governs nationally.)

A further problem is that few Tijuanaans can afford anti-HIV drugs. The current "cocktails" that halt HIV replication cost up to \$20,000 a year.

For seven years, the gay clinic ACOSIDA has distributed free AIDS drugs that are brought to Tijuana from the bedsides of people who die in San Diego hospitals. But even that pipeline is drying up now that the new protease-inhibitor-based combination therapies have reduced AIDS deaths in San Diego.

*Leftover or unneeded AIDS medications can be shipped to Alejandro García, Paseo del Pedregal 1980, Playas de Tijuana, B.C., Mexico, or delivered directly to the clinic on Thursday evenings between 5 pm and 8 pm. It is located at 8324 10th St., downtown, one and a half blocks east of Revolution Ave. For more information, phone 011-52-66-80-99-63.*

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