

AT HOME AT OUR HOUSE

With 10 years of service to the HIV/AIDS community, the Portland-based facility reflects on the pandemic's new challenges

by Inga Sorensen • photos by Linda Klierer

At the age of 23, Sonia Harrison found herself at a place in life more traditionally reserved for people three times her age.

"I was a young widow," says the Texas native, now 44.

Harrison's 25-year-old husband, who had been her high school sweetheart, was killed during construction of the couple's home; it was an untimely death that set Harrison on a path not solely pocked by loss and grieving, but also by self-discovery.

"I found a strength and resilience I didn't know I had," explains Harrison, who moved to Oregon from the Lone Star State 10 years ago and now resides in Beaverton with her spouse of a dozen years, Bob. She is a vice president of an area public relations firm.

Nearly every week for the past six years, the Harrisons have journeyed from their suburban home to inner Southeast Portland to volunteer at Our House of Portland, a residential care facility for men and women living with AIDS.

While there, Harrison employs one of her true loves—cooking—cranking out Southern delights like catfish and hushpuppies, green beans, and pineapple upside-down cake for as many as 18 people at a time.

"I'm Hispanic and I often cook Mexican food. Enchiladas are big," says Harrison, who blends and balances spices just enough to ensure sufficient flavor while avoiding upsetting delicate stomachs.

"Back when I first started volunteering, some people would say to me, 'Don't do that.' At the time, many people were still uneasy about AIDS," says Harrison, who had not previously worked closely with people living with HIV and AIDS. "It did not concern me in the least."

Indeed, Harrison says upon her arrival in the Pacific Northwest, she pondered possible causes and organizations that could benefit from her desire, time and skills.

"I had seen a couple of articles about Our House. It piqued my interest," she says, adding, "I was drawn to this place."

Maybe it was because she could understand the pain of losing a beloved at such a young age. After all, AIDS has swept away many prematurely. Maybe it was because she had personal knowledge of how a helping hand could fortify a damaged spirit.

Whatever pulled Harrison has kept her there for the past six-plus years, not only slicing and dicing but serving on the board as well. "There is nothing like it. Our House is truly special," she says.

The hundreds of others who have volunteered over the past decade would undoubtedly echo the sentiment that Our House of Portland is the kind of space whose purpose—and people—inspire the best in us as human beings. The kind of space that intrinsically demands the swapping of pretension and competitiveness for more harmonic caring and compassion.

Ensnared on a quiet, tree-lined street at 2727 SE Alder St., Our House is billed as a 10-bed residential care facility.

Its mission statement reads: "Our House of

Portland is dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for people in the advanced stages of AIDS. Our care approach includes healing of body, mind and spirit in a homelike environment. We encourage self-determination and honor the needs of the whole person."

Since opening its doors in 1988, the non-profit has served an estimated 400 residents and 2,800 family members and friends. Staff, both full- and part-time, currently total 32.

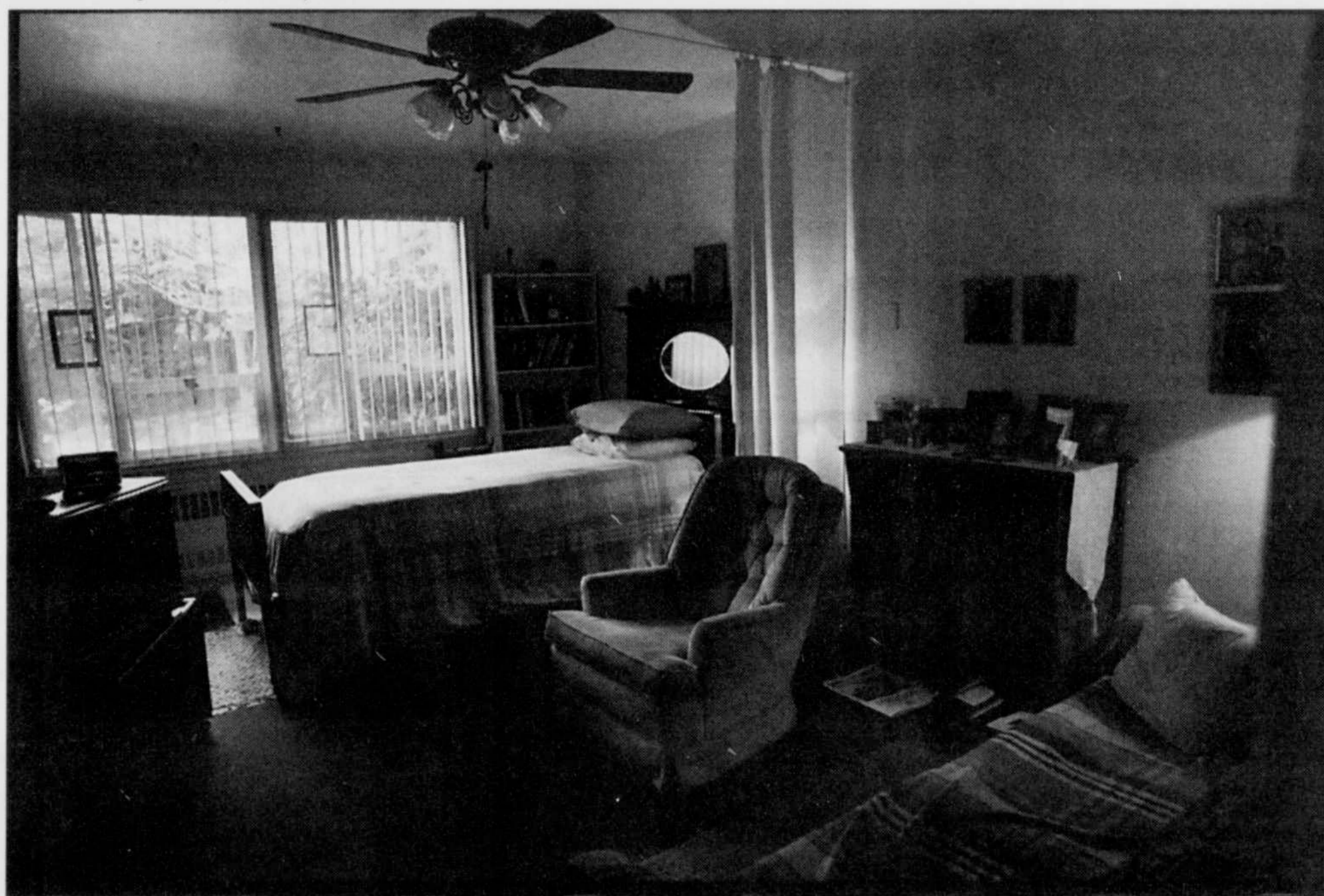
cated themselves about the disease literally work hand in hand with men and women who are living with it and dying from it.

Touching and talking. Sitting together in silence. Laughing at life's absurdities or a silly joke's punch line. Sharing stories of one's past, of families and lovers, of favorite books and movies, trading remembrances of residents who have moved on—these are snippets of life at Our House.

administrative offices and, of course, the life-sustaining nurses' station.

I was delighted to receive my tour from Bill Hancock, who in December 1995 entered Our House as a resident poised for death.

However, on this day in mid-April 1998, Hancock is working as an Our House volunteer. Prior to a request to show me around, he'd been baking pumpkin pies and hanging with some of the residents.



A room with a view of the garden at Our House

On May 3, the establishment will celebrate 10 years of service to the HIV/AIDS community with a three-hour event featuring guest speakers, awards, music and a moment of remembrance for residents who have died of AIDS-related complications.

Early on, Our House was at another Southeast Portland locale: a five-bed home at Southeast 26th Avenue and Powell Boulevard in which three of the five bedrooms could not be reached without climbing stairs—no minor matter for those weakened by illness.

It was clear a larger space was needed, given the structural deficits and the then-growing demand for more beds. Hence the eventual installation of Our House one year later on Southeast Alder Street.

Ann Huntwork has been with Our House since day one.

"There was a great deal of stigma attached to the disease back then," says the 66-year-old medical social worker. "At the time it was like the new leprosy."

She says Our House has long been a respite, a place where caring individuals who have edu-

"It's about connection," says Huntwork. "I can't stress how important that has been, particularly when there was so much stigma."

Our House's relative homeyness creates a soothing atmosphere. A fireplace and large-screen television sit in a living room dotted with comfortable couches and chairs. An exercise bike is plopped in the corner—a new and notable addition that is not without symbolism.

Dinner is served family style, with residents, volunteers and others coming to the banquet-length table, which appears to seat nearly 20.

Residents have their own rooms, which are, for the most part, decorated in their personal styles.

Rooms are equipped with bureaus that have been specially designed for people in wheelchairs. The Joinery, a local company that crafts handmade wooden furniture, built and donated the dressers, in addition to the dining room table and chairs, and another table used for memorial services.

Our House also holds a couple of small

"This is a quilt that has the names of Our House residents who have died," Hancock says as he points to one of two quilts which hang on the facility's walls.

"I always said my name was going to go right here," he adds, placing his finger on the quilt dead center. "I wanted it there, in the middle."

Given that Hancock entered Our House severely weak and underweight, his name probably should have landed there.

"I thought I was going to die," he says softly.

But a couple of things happened: A new medicinal regimen took hold in Hancock's system, making him stronger with each day. He also fell in love—with William Reed, now 34, another Our House resident who was preparing for the end of life.

Both men responded well enough to their treatments—and each other—they walked out of Our House in July 1996 and found a home of their very own. The couple lives in Northeast Portland with their two

Continued on page 21