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LOCAL news

MOVIN' ON UP

Esteemed Texan activist takes the reins at Cascade AIDS Project, fulfilling a lifelong dream to live in the Pacific Northwest by Gip Plaster

The new executive director of the Cascade AIDS Project in Portland is already a well-respected AIDS activist and community leader, but now he is following his dream.

Thomas Bruner, the founding director of the organization credited with making the pandemic a topic for open conversation in much of northern Texas, resigned from Fort Worth's AIDS Outreach Center in May.

About a year ago, he told other leaders in the organization that he was accelerating his search for a job in the Pacific Northwest because he has always yearned to live in that part of the country.

After declining about five other offers in the region, he accepted the job at CAP.

"Portland's beautiful. It's God's country. People are good, kind, loving and outgoing," says Bruner, 37.

While he grew up in Texas and enjoys the people there, he says the state is "not a place overflowing with natural beauty."

Bruner adds that Portland has a reputation for being more gay-affirming than Fort Worth and says the change "sounds real appealing" to both him and his partner.

Bruner says he initially planned to stay in Fort Worth only two or three years, but he remained with the AIDS Outreach Center for a decade.

"I don't know how we are going to replace him," the organization's board president, Roy Brooks, told the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, the city's mainstream daily newspaper.

The publication covered Bruner's resignation in its Metro section rather than on the front page, which is ironic given that the paper credits Bruner with making AIDS front-page news in Fort Worth.

"His name has become synonymous with AIDS education, services and advocacy in Tarrant County and Texas," said the *Star-Telegram*.

Roger Wedell, the executive director of AIDS Interfaith Network of Tarrant County, also offers praise.

"[Bruner] has been one of the trailblazers in Fort Worth and Tarrant County regarding HIV and AIDS issues, as well as full civil rights for lesbian and gay persons," Wedell tells *Just Out*.

He cites Bruner's numerous appointments to boards and commissions, as well as his extensive volunteer work.

"He also has an excellent working knowledge of government processes and how to use those processes to address real human concerns," Wedell says.

The AIDS Outreach Center was founded in 1985 by a lesbian activist who wanted to offer mental health and AIDS services to lesbians and gay men in the area. It was incorporated as a social service agency in 1986, and by 1987 the organization had changed its focus to concentrate on HIV and AIDS.

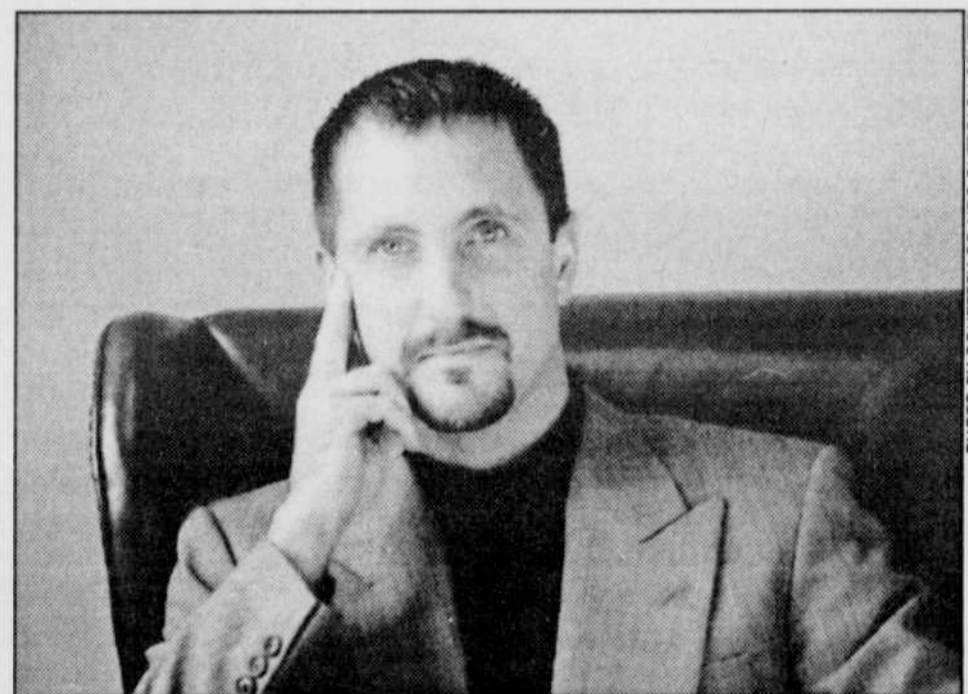
In March 1988, it hired Bruner, its first executive director. That month, the center served 25 clients, all white gay men. With Bruner at the

helm, the agency's \$40,000 budget increased to \$3.6 million, and the staff grew from one to more than 50, with over 1,200 volunteers annually. The organization now serves 2,000 clients—women, men and children of diverse backgrounds. It operates four facilities across Tarrant County and serves a nine-county area.

Bruner says he is proud of several things he has accomplished in Fort Worth. He takes pride in the center's satellite offices that reach underserved communities.

He says he has helped the AIDS Outreach Center maintain a stable financial situation and create a "family system" of service delivery through which services are offered to friends, spouses and parents of clients.

Bruner adds that he is most proud of his work to expand the center's focus: "AOC had to mainstream itself in the community-at-large very early on to maintain itself. Fort Worth is not known for having a large gay community infrastructure."



Thomas Bruner

Bruner says CAP has fewer staff members than his former employer and has a slightly smaller cash budget. He believes, however, that the two organizations are very similar overall.

Although Bruner has already spent a number of hours at work in Portland during a recent trip and is in frequent contact with CAP, he is not ready to announce what changes he is planning for the agency, which is Oregon's largest provider of nonmedical HIV and AIDS services.

During his first few weeks on the job, Bruner says, he will follow workers to learn what they do. After that, he will spend a few weeks visiting other HIV and human service providers throughout the metropolitan area to see how they get things done.

"I think it would be very presumptuous of me to think that I know how Portland, Oregon, works," he says. "I think my first order is to go and listen."

Bruner will move to Portland in July with his partner of more than two years, Kevin Hendrick, an accounting student. Bruner's stint at CAP officially begins July 18.

Bruner says he and Hendrick intend to have a visible role in their new community, volunteering for local organizations, attending symphonies, concerts and operas, and enjoying the natural beauty.


"[We'll be found] on or around Mount Hood learning how to ski, or camping, hiking, fishing and combing the Oregon coast," he says, "and at home reading, chatting with friends and enjoying the company of our two dogs. We'll have a diverse, balanced life in Portland."

PHOTO BY COURTESY OF AIDS OUTREACH CENTER

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