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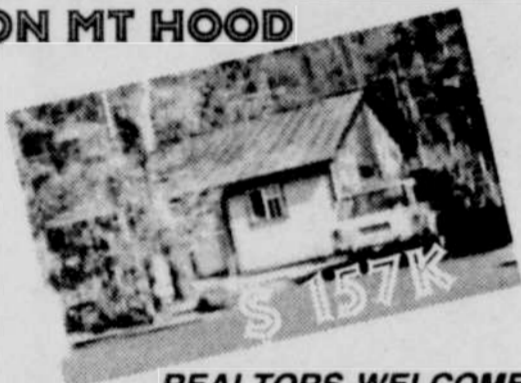
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NORTHWESTnews

MAKING FUN

As the AIDS epidemic turns 20, a Portland man works to make life a little easier for kids by Jonathan Kipp

Not long after Sean Cox learned his dad was HIV-positive he had a cathartic moment while sitting among thousands of people listening to an Elton John concert in the mid-1990s. When the performer dedicated one of his songs to "my brothers and sisters living with AIDS," it touched something deep inside Cox, and he completely broke down.

Cox never had heard the words "living" and "AIDS" in the same sentence. Like most young Americans, he had grown up thinking AIDS did, in fact, equal death.

He says that evening changed his life. He realized he didn't have to be ashamed, he didn't have to hide, and he could have some hope.

As the AIDS epidemic approaches its 20-year anniversary June 5, Cox readily admits good things have happened since he found out his father was one of millions infected with HIV. For starters, young people infected with and affected by HIV know they don't have to be alone anymore.

When Cox co-founded For Us Northwest in 1999, he started reaching out to other young people affected by the epidemic—both HIV-positive youngsters and those who have family members with the disease. Before the organization formed, Portland had no specific services for youth.

With Cox at the helm, For Us Northwest quickly went from raising \$700 in cash the first year to gaining official nonprofit status with a budget of \$145,000. He is now the paid executive director.

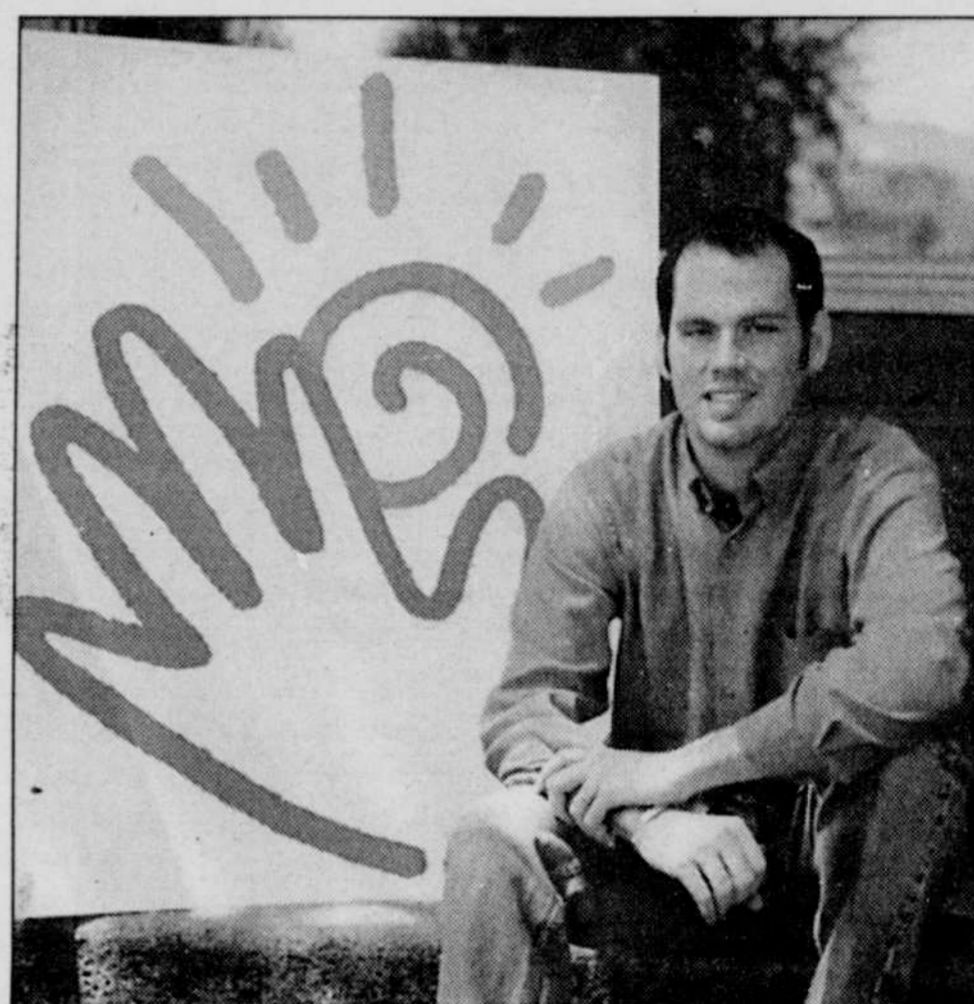
The group provides support through social activities for 3- to 24-year-olds. A total of 20 youth participate: one-third are HIV-positive, 65 percent have lost at least one loved one to AIDS, about one-third are children of color, and two-thirds are male.

Cox also sits on the Portland Area HIV Services Planning Council. He says he's met with workers who have been active for the entire 20 years of the epidemic. Some admit they never have given much thought to the challenges faced by children affected by HIV/AIDS. Cox says his organization is helping change that.

"What's most exciting for us is having an open and strong communication with agencies," he says. "It's incredibly encouraging."

But after 20 years, not all things are changing. Cox has talked to young people from throughout the country. He says he is amazed that stigma, isolation and fear still are out there. Kids continue to get kicked out of school and are ostracized by their peers and their communities.

A recent study by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation reveals at least part of the reason people with HIV/AIDS still are being stigmatized. The research shows one in five U.S. citi-



Sean Cox formed For Us Northwest to help young people infected with and affected by HIV

zens think sharing a drinking glass can transmit HIV. About 16 percent think touching a toilet seat can or might transmit HIV. However, the study shows U.S. citizens are aware of the pain people with HIV/AIDS endure: 84 percent think they still face "some" or "a lot of" prejudice and discrimination.

Cox says that is why his organization is so important. He says he sees the impact the work has on kids' lives.

"It's that they are able to feel safe," Cox says. "There's nothing better...than to be able to feel they can be themselves."

Erica (not her real name) told Cox all she wanted from For Us Northwest was to have a slumber party. Both the little girl and her mom are HIV-positive and had the bottles of medication on their kitchen countertops to prove it. She was always too afraid to have friends over, fearing they'd find out the family's secret.

"She never felt safe enough to have a slumber party," Cox explains. "This girl just wanted to be 11. She didn't want to be 'the kid with AIDS.'"

But after connecting with For Us Northwest (better known by children as FUN), Erica started making friends and getting stronger. She eventually did have that slumber party.

Cox chuckles as he recalls young Erica extending an invitation even to him. "To be able to provide that for kids...well, there's no way to put a value on that."

Cox says that when his dad was diagnosed in 1985, he was told he wouldn't see his children's graduation or wedding. He prepared to die.

But Jim Cox did see his son graduate from Portland State University a few years back. And coming up June 30 he will watch Sean get married. ☐

To volunteer, make a donation or learn more about FOR US NORTHWEST call 503-777-4903, ext. 1, or send e-mail to forusinc@hotmail.com.

PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS