

# THE OTHER ROSE CITY

Douglas County AIDS Council thrives despite conservative climate

by Patricia L. MacAodha

As Oregon communities go, Roseburg is a fair-sized town with a strong rural flavor. The atmosphere is conservative, but the gay and lesbian population is significant.

In 1986, the Roseburg AIDS Task Force formed to look at how people living with HIV/AIDS in Douglas County could best be served and how to begin educating this southern Oregon community. Some of those original members are still hard at work.

Billy Russo is one of the people who has been helping strengthen services for years. As Douglas County AIDS Council executive director, he and his determined staff, many of whom are volunteers, have been able to develop a successful program focused on client services, outreach to the gay and lesbian community and the Positive Speakers in the Schools program.

Each program was developed in direct response to challenges faced by local people living with HIV/AIDS: eviction from living quarters; utility and telephone shut-offs; inability to keep and find work; lack of food, clothing and medical care; and problems with intravenous drug use, alcoholism and domestic violence. Although these needs transcend urban/rural differences, the concerns of Douglas County citizens are not the same as those in Multnomah County.

Providing HIV/AIDS services, Russo says, "has a powerful charge associated with it. Ignorance and intolerance fuel this charge. It wasn't that long ago that three children in Florida had their home torched when their HIV status was revealed."

Russo says noncooperation from Douglas County's health officer has resulted in limited funds and made improvement and expansion of services difficult. The departments autonomously choose how their money is spent; administrators call the shots, and HIV/AIDS programs often suffer because of that privilege. But last year the council received its first-ever allocation of federal funding for risk reduction of infection.

"In Douglas County, HIV is perceived as a gay disease," Russo says. "Public health promotes this perception by simply not addressing the issue. Homophobia contributes to a perceived second-class status for people living with HIV."

Douglas County client demographics show a significant presence of HIV/AIDS through heterosexual and perinatal transmission. According to statistics gathered between April 1 and June 29, eight out of 35 cases were exposed through heterosexual contact, two through perinatal transmission.

A statewide issue is the Oregon Health Division's recent decision to pursue name-based HIV reporting. Russo says anonymity has been a key to getting people to agree to testing.

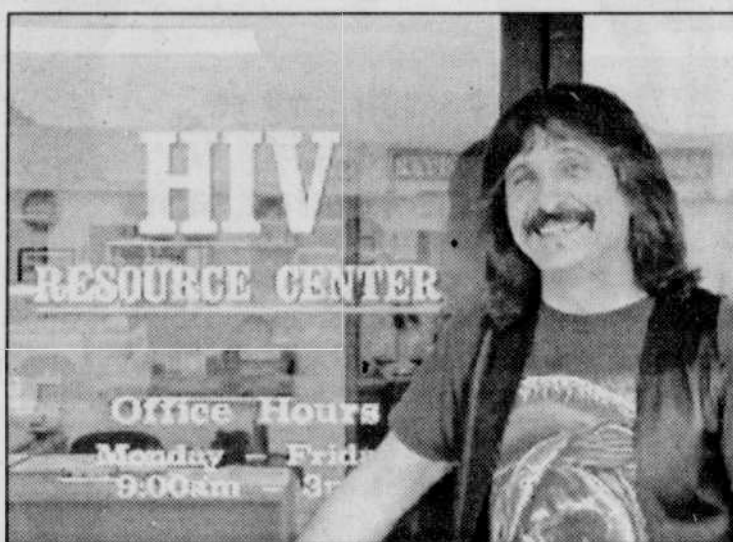
He opposes the administrative rule making HIV reportable like tuberculosis or syphilis because it will affect "our ability to screen [injecting drug users] and gay men. Both groups live on the margins of society.

Both groups fear and distrust authority."

Outreach meetings were held throughout the state to gather testimony regarding name-based reporting. In Douglas County, three discussions addressed the issue.

Russo says gay and lesbian citizens desire privacy because they fear detection, violence, job loss and rejection by family and friends—but mostly because it's none of their neighbors' business. "All too often, we are the focus of their attention."

The policy recently was changed to allow for modification of the name to create a unique



In addition to serving as Douglas County AIDS Council executive director, Billy Russo also writes for its newsletter, *Work in Progress*

identifier in cases where the client is severely concerned about confidentiality. Russo thinks the state should "use unique identifiers across the board."

Nevertheless, the council provides an impressive list of services to people living with HIV/AIDS and their families. Financial assistance for housing, transportation and food are just a few ways the agency helps clients out.

More than 15 years of HIV/AIDS work in the Roseburg area has brought about many changes, including the closure of Ruby House, a Level III adult foster home. Mercy Hospital now provides these services.

And it seems another change is in the making. A recent advertisement in Roseburg's *News-Review* offered the position of executive director for the Douglas County AIDS Council.

Is Russo calling it quits? Of course not! He points out that he has held the position since January 1998 and that he's ready for someone else to do it.

"My actual job is case manager and gay/bi outreach worker," he says. "I do administration on the side...hate it!"

Russo acknowledges his best work is and always has been with the people for whom he struggles with enthusiastic determination. When it comes to fighting HIV/AIDS and the attitudes that do so much harm, the world could use a lot more Billy Russos. **JM**

For more information about the DOUGLAS COUNTY AIDS COUNCIL call 541-440-2761, fax 541-440-9665, send e-mail to [dcac@presys.com](mailto:dcac@presys.com) or visit the Internet site [www.hivroseburg.org](http://www.hivroseburg.org).

PATRICIA L. MACAODHA is a Portland free-lance writer. E-mail her at [plmacaodha@hotmail.com](mailto:plmacaodha@hotmail.com).

GRAND  
OPENING

A Formal Affair  
TUXEDO

formerly Alameda Tuxedo

Deborah Drorbaugh • owner

4512 NE Sandy Blvd. • Portland, OR 97213

503.287.2824

[www.aformalaffairtuxedo.com](http://www.aformalaffairtuxedo.com)



JEWEL A. ROBINSON  
Multimillion \$ Producer

OFFICE (503) 281-4040

VOICE MAIL (503) 301-4283

E-MAIL [Jewel2U@teleport.com](mailto:Jewel2U@teleport.com)

See my  
Exclusive  
Listings  
on my  
webpage

<http://www.jewelrobinson.com>

1730 N.E. 10th Avenue  
Portland, OR 97212

Prudential  
Northwest Properties

Home-cooked food and generous cocktails at working class prices.

Under new management!

Daily breakfast & lunch specials!

"a vintage gem" -Barfly Magazine



7819 SW Capitol Highway • Multnomah Village • 503.246.9097

## RETIREMENT IS NOT THE TIME TO REALIZE YOU CAN'T RETIRE.

There's no time like the present to plan for the future. And there's no substitute for experience when it comes to making those important decisions. That's why you should talk with Floreid Walker, Senior Financial Advisor, about Long Term Health Care Insurance options, Estate Planning, Life Insurance, and Retirement Planning. She'll help develop a plan that's right for you and insure your "golden years" are truly golden.

WADDELL  
& REED  
Financial Services •

Investing. With a plan.™

For a personal financial plan, call:

FLOREID WALKER  
Senior Financial Advisor

503.238.6036 ext 109

500 N.E. Multnomah, Suite 278  
Portland, OR 97232

[www.waddell.com](http://www.waddell.com)

email: [floreid32983@wradvisors.com](mailto:floreid32983@wradvisors.com)

Member SIPC

