

BREAK OF DAWN

Health worker wins state award as frontline warrior against HIV

by Jack Turteltaub

Dawn Spellman—a quiet but dedicated fighter in the war against HIV for the past 12 years—has been named Health Educator of the Year by Washington state's AIDSNet. She is the recipient for the Southwest Washington Health District, a region covering 11 counties.

The soft-spoken lesbian is modest about the recognition, saying "it probably has more to do with the years I've been doing it. I feel wonderful that I was recognized, but there are a lot of people who are deserving."

Supervisor Therese Falkner begs to differ. She says Spellman "brings a passion and commitment to her work," part of "an uphill battle in every community" against HIV and other sexually or blood-transmitted diseases.

Education coordinator Suzanne Hidde, last year's award recipient in the district, describes her colleague as "a tenacious advocate for the disenfranchised, marginalized and underrepresented populations" she serves. "Dawn tries to look at the bigger picture...homeless shelters, health clinics, drug and alcohol centers, how to bridge the gap between agencies."

The Wyoming native moved to the Portland area in 1995, working part time at Cascade AIDS Project, where she developed and coordinated HIV education, outreach, testing and peer counseling programs. She later took a part-time job in Vancouver that turned into a full-time job.

Today, Spellman coordinates an off-site outreach clinic providing HIV testing and information for gay and bi men. It is held twice a week in downtown Vancouver.

Spellman believes the program is working because it reduces some of the barriers preventing gay and bi men from getting tested. Many "don't feel comfortable" walking into a regular health department and prefer the convenience, perhaps the anonymity, of an evening clinic.

The program is making a difference because these people otherwise would not get tested, according to Spellman. "It's appalling to me that some men are not finding that they are HIV-positive until being admitted to the hospital with PCP," a type of pneumonia that can develop when the virus attacks a weakened immune system.

Spellman also is working on hepatitis screening and vaccination. Last summer "we set up a testing booth and free hepatitis screening for the guys and free breast exams for the ladies at Saturday in the Park," Vancouver's annual Pride festival.

She also is excited about her work with a crystal methamphetamine needle exchange program targeting the gay male community. Like the HIV clinic, it uses a harm reduction approach so users can make better choices.

The program provides free needles, condoms and lots of information to people when they

come in. Spellman also is available if users "want to talk to someone."

She says crystal meth is a huge problem and "almost unrecognized" in parts of the gay community. She describes speed as "the perfect drug for gay men. If you have self-esteem issues, it goes away. If you want to lose weight, it helps you do that. You want to have a lot of sex, there you go. It's scary because we're not addressing it from a health perspective."

Spellman notes the greatest dangers lie in the way crystal meth affects brain neurotransmitters—leading to long-term depression—and an increased risk for HIV and hepatitis infections as many users engage in more frequent and more unsafe sex, especially when they are high. She has tracked one compelling statistic with program participants: Before getting informa-



Dawn Spellman coordinates an HIV outreach clinic and a crystal meth needle exchange program

tion, 30 percent used needles only once before discarding; after learning more, that number increased to 70 percent.

The harm reduction model, the essence of which is "to deal with people where they're at, not where we think they should be," is critical to Spellman's work. This public health philosophy attempts to give them the information and tools to make their own decisions, regardless of others' moral beliefs.

"I believe in people," Spellman says. "People don't always make the right choices, but if they are given the right information, I think they will make better choices."

So the fight goes on. Spellman knows there are no easy answers, but she's an absolute believer in health education and giving people real choices. Her many years of concern is obvious as she talks about preventing sexually transmitted diseases and helping those "who are stigmatized by our society."

Spellman lives happily with her partner, Kim Connor, in Vancouver. They have two dogs but no cats in the otherwise "average lesbian household." Spellman loves to travel, plays softball and stays in touch with her family in Wyoming and her partner's family in California. [M]

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