

# The House That Volunteers Built

## AIDS facility celebrates 15 years of care and support

by Tom Stevenson

**W**hy do people volunteer? Ask the questions, and you will get a plethora of answers. Some are incredibly personal. Some are even selfish. But the fact remains, without the help of dedicated volunteers, any number of groups, agencies and facilities would be unable to operate.

One of those organizations is Our House of Portland, which will celebrate its 15th anniversary this month. The 24-hour skilled nursing care facility in Southeast Portland caters to those who have AIDS and are unable to live by themselves. While trained staff members administer the professional medical care the residents receive and paid employees keep the nonprofit operating, the group that completes the inner circle is an amazingly dedicated cadre of volunteers.

Kathryn Siebert has served as volunteer director at Our House for five years and an employee for 10 years. She actually started out as a volunteer before taking her first paid position. Nancy Sellers also came on board first as a volunteer, serving on the board of directors before asking to take the executive director position on an interim, then permanent, basis.

Siebert says she is overwhelmed by the generosity, compassion and absolute dedication of the volunteers who serve at Our House. "They are all amazing people."

According to Siebert, 120 to 130 people volunteer at least four hours a week. Between 30 and 50 more come in about once a month.

Of the 120-plus who come in each and every week, about half of them are

what Siebert calls "long-termers." They have been there for at least three years, most for five or more.

Along with Siebert and Sellers, *Just Out* talked to five of those long-time volunteers: Sister Kate St. Martin, an 82-year-old nun; Ben Estes, a gay restaurant owner and manager; Joanne Barham, a heterosexual retiree; Deanna Bryant, a member of the trans community; and Lisa Benson, a bisexual massage therapist.

The volunteer troops "do it all," Sellers says. "They all give so much."

**T**he volunteers do everything from answering telephones to cooking meals. They serve as personal care assistants, they do gardening, they take residents to appointments, and often they just sit and spend quiet one-and-one time with those who call Our House home.

To put into perspective the amount of work these folks do, one year they donated a total of 13,103 hours. "I figured it out, and we would have to hire at least six more full-time people if we didn't have the volunteers," Sellers says. "We could not afford to do that."

One would think Siebert and Sellers might have a tough time getting volunteers, considering the emotional aspect of the work. They say that is not the case. In fact, some people whose lives have been affected by Our House—through visiting a friend or relative who is a resident, for instance—often choose to return and volunteer. Many others find their way to the facility simply because their lives have been touched by AIDS.

There are also retirees who are looking for a place they can go simply to stay active. And there are many, many



Kathryn Siebert (left) directs Our House volunteers like Jean Frost

PHOTO BY MARY DAVIS

younger people who are starting to become involved.

"We do have a whole range of volunteers," Siebert says. "They come from all walks of life and for any number of reasons."

Bryant says a friend first suggested she should volunteer at Our House.

"I was at the beginning of my transition, and [it] would be my first job in my chosen gender," says Bryant, who has now been there for three years. "I answer phones and do my best at trying to fatten people up. I have always loved to cook, and the residents seem to love what I do for them in that area. Besides that...I do a little of everything."

Benson, who has been volunteering for seven years, said she was looking for something to enrich her spiritual life when she chose to help Our House.

"I wanted to give back" to the community, she says. "I wanted to work with people with AIDS. I went there as a massage therapist, but I kept ending up in the kitchen."

To this day, Benson spends her time at Our House in the kitchen and says she loves it.

St. Martin was introduced to Our House nine years ago by a friend who was volunteering for another AIDS organization. She serves on the personal care and spiritual life teams, which means at some points she might be helping residents change clothes

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—Nancy Sellers

*"Just having someone there to hold your hand makes a difference"*

—Sister Kate St. Martin



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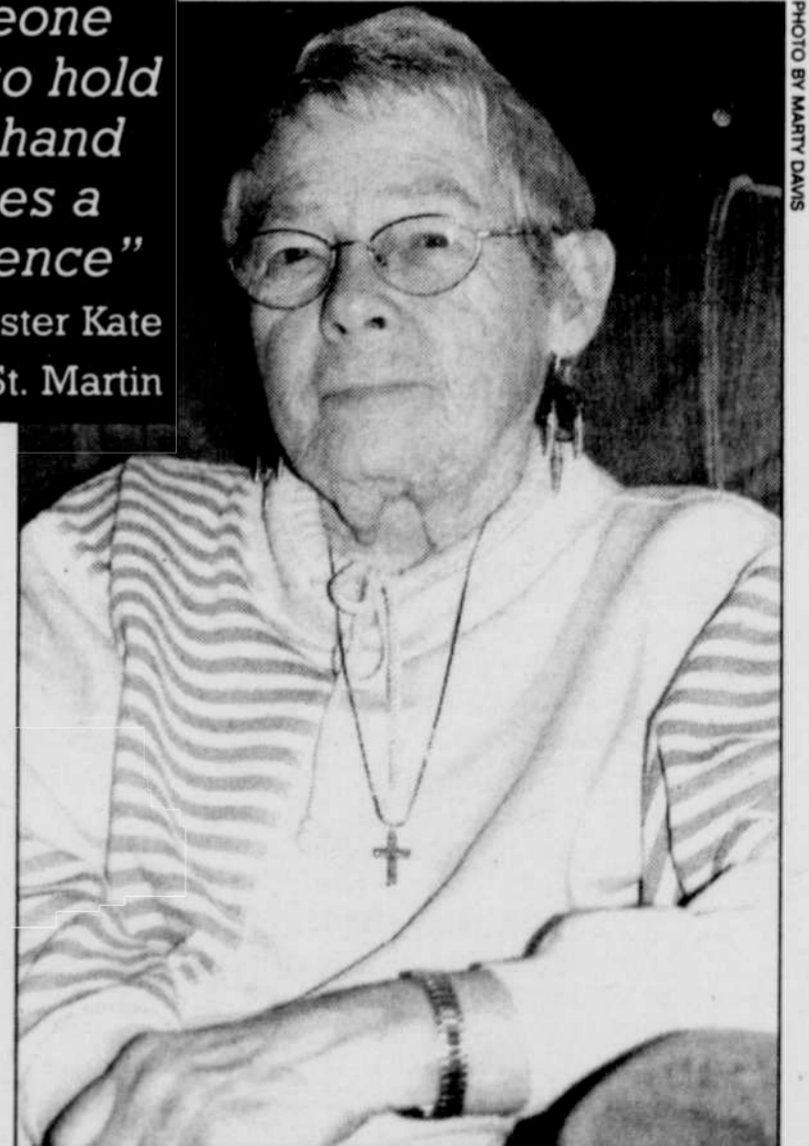


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