

northwest

Celebrating Bill Hancock

Public health activist dies

by Jaymee R. Cuti

Portland public health activist Bill Hancock succumbed to brain cancer June 29, surviving a decade longer than he ever expected, and packing his life full of public service contributions.

Hancock, 51, died peacefully in his sleep and was surrounded by his friends and family. He had been undergoing radiation treatment for brain cancer when he contracted an infection last month, and died within days.

Hancock was born May 27, 1955, in West Bloomfield, Mich., a suburb of Detroit. He was the youngest of six children in a self-described "big, loud Irish Catholic family." He relocated to Portland in 1980 after attending Michigan State University.

Hancock's life tells the story of an incredible recovery from illness due to AIDS in the '90s, and the life he filled advocating for those without health care.

"He was ready for death more than 10 years ago, and he escaped it and had this whole life I don't think he anticipated at the time, which he greatly celebrated," said Kathryn Siebert, Our House of Portland director of volunteers.

In 1996, Hancock considered undergoing a doctor's assisted suicide to spare his loved ones' prolonged grief.

"Prognosis-wise, I would say 12 months or less for myself—whichever way you go, the outcome is the same, you know, that I'm going to die," said

Hancock in an interview for Oregon Public Broadcasting on April 8, 1996. "You see these people who have no physical or mental abilities and are laying in a bed, you know, racked with pain. And I had big fears about that for myself. I don't want to be that way—and I'm not going to put my parents through it, either. I'm not going to leave them in a position of having to make some kind of decision as to when they're going to pull the plug. I'm not going to do that to them."

But Hancock recovered and managed a busy life full of laughter, love and professional accomplishment, according to those who knew him well.

"He had a great sense of humor and a wonderful laugh," said Becky Hamond, associate executive director of Cascade AIDS Project. "He was very full of life."

Hancock moved into Our House on Dec. 5, 1995, where he met his partner, William Reed. "He came in here expecting to die, as did his partner," said Siebert.

At that time, HIV/AIDS medication was making rapid advancements, and saved the lives of Hancock and Reed, also an Our House resident.

"They met, they fell in love, they moved out, married and had a long, continuing life together," Siebert remembered. "They both came back about a year later and became active volunteers."

Hancock, Reed and a third resident were the

first residents to leave Our House alive and recovered June 22, 1996. Siebert called this a turning point in treatment for the disease.


"It felt like a great turn in the evolution of the disease for us back then. It was something, for us, worth celebrating," she said.

Hancock and Reed married in 2004 in Multnomah County shortly before Reed's death.

Hancock's experience in the public health arena ignited a passion for health care advocacy, which continued throughout his life. He was policy coordinator for Cascade AIDS Project, representing the agency on a statewide committee, developing CAP's public policy priority list and sometimes traveling to Salem and Washington, D.C., to lobby legislators about issues concerning public health. Last month he marched in the Portland Pride Parade with CAP. He served on the HIV Planning Council and Tri-County Safety Net Enterprises board. He completed his third term June 12 as chairman of the Multnomah County Community Health Council and was a member of the county's Citizen Budget Advisory Committee. He was the executive director of Portland Saturday Market from 1980 to 1991, a time when the organization's annual budget swelled from \$25,000 to \$1.2 million. He also met annually with Pacific University graduate students of occupational therapy to help them become better therapists.



Bill Hancock will be remembered as a hero for public health.

"He was an advocate for access to health care and patients' rights. He was an active consumer voice, and that was really a gift for the Multnomah County Health Department," said Sonia Manhas, manager of the county's Chronic Disease Prevention program. "He dedicated an incredible amount of time to make the health department a better organization." 

A celebration of BILL HANCOCK's life is planned in place of a funeral from noon to 2 p.m. July 22 at Darcelle XV Showplace, 208 N.W. Third Ave., where Hancock performed many years ago. In lieu of flowers, remembrances may be made to Cascade AIDS Project or Our House of Portland.



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