

NEWS

Strength in Numbers

HIV-Positive Volunteers Put Their Names – and Status – on the Line for Project 150+

By Ashley Flanagan

Oregon turns 150 this year, and people across the state are coming out to celebrate – including some Oregonians who too often stay hidden.

Cascade AIDS Project is contributing to the sesquicentennial festivities with an event called Project 150+: Screw Stigma! On May 16, HIV-positive volunteers will meet to beautify Portland by cleaning up litter and graffiti. It's part of Down By The Riverside, a statewide event for environmental service projects sponsored annually by Stop Oregon Litter & Vandalism.

But the Project 150+ workers will be doing something that sets them apart from other volunteers that day. The whole time, they'll be wearing t-shirts that announce their HIV status to the world.

There's no fundraising aspect (although donations to defray costs can be made at cascadeaids.org). The goal is "letting the community know that we are here and we are productive," says Maralyn Gill, one of the event's organizers. "We're all different walks of life, and we all have HIV."

It's not a low-profile event: Former Governor Barbara Roberts, a member of Cascade AIDS Project's Board of Advisors, will give an opening speech, along with the organization's executive director, Michael Kaplan. "We invited media to the event," says intern Mike Lamore. "We told people to be prepared for having your photo in the *Oregonian*."

The organizers know firsthand what an important decision they're asking people to make. Volunteer Eric Schaffer, who lost his job after being diagnosed with HIV, says that when he was approached about helping organize Project 150+, "My first answer was 'no way,' because I didn't want to be interviewed. I didn't want to be in the press at this level."

But he changed his mind for a familiar reason. "I don't want to hide in another closet," he says. "Coming out as a gay man was challenging enough at one point in my life, and HIV status is very much the same."

"Everyone I've talked to has their own stigma story," Schaffer adds. "Some people were diagnosed and didn't leave their homes for four years, never wanted to go outside. Some people didn't want to seek health care."

And that, organizers say, is why what they're doing is so crucial. "It's about reducing the stigma," says Lamore. "It's about changing the perception, changing the face of HIV in Oregon."

Too often, Lamore points out, HIV is still seen as a disease of young gay men. "So much of the work in Portland is done by gay guys," he says. "We wanted to show what HIV really is." Cascade AIDS Project is working with other HIV advocacy and support groups, such as Women of Wisdom at the Quest Center

for Integrated Health, to encourage under-represented groups like women and people of color to come out for the event.

Gill, a grandmother of six who was 49 when she was diagnosed, knows from personal experience the danger of thinking of HIV as a disease that attacks a particular demographic. After her husband's death, she thought she was too old to worry about safe sex. "Of course I couldn't get pregnant; I never even thought about it," she says.

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—ERIC SCHAFFER,
A PROJECT 150+ VOLUNTEER

Due to her age and gender, her HIV symptoms went misdiagnosed as menopause for three years. "This is why I'm becoming such an advocate," she explains.

In addition to the HIV-positive volunteers, people who don't have HIV – or aren't ready to make their status public – can register as support volunteers. They'll be checking in workers, taking photos, bringing water and snacks – and providing invaluable emotional aid.

"Once you have support, you can do wonders," says Gill. Having been diagnosed in Belize, where HIV is even more heavily stigmatized than in the U.S., she knows the importance of open, supportive communities. "As long as you've got support, you can make it through this. It's a real intricate part of healing with HIV."

Since February, more than 50 HIV-positive volunteers have registered, as well as 18 support volunteers. Organizers hope to reach 150 volunteers, and they're optimistic. "If we don't make it, we'll get close," says Lamore.

But Schaffer emphasizes that what they've already accomplished is a victory in itself. "If we get 150 people, fantastic, but if we only get 55, no one can say we failed," he says.

The message is still clear: "We're part of the community," Schaffer says. "We love Oregon, we want to contribute, and HIV status doesn't have to set us apart."

Project 150+ takes place Saturday, May 16, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Volunteers will meet by Shemanski Fountain, at SW Park Ave. and SW Salmon St. in Portland. To register or get more info, visit cascadeaids.org.

A pre-event discussion about disclosure in a public setting is scheduled May 11, 6–8 pm, at the Men's Wellness Center, 928 SW Stark.

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