

A WINTER'S TALE

Living With HIV and AIDS in Provincetown

by Dennis Rhodes

There's this really strange little place called Provincetown. That's what some friends told me back in 1980. That's why I'm here!" says Len Stewart, the executive director of the Provincetown AIDS Support Group.

He sits on a well-worn sofa in PASG's busy office talking about life before and after the advent of AIDS in the community known simply — and affectionately — as P'town. A handsome, serious-minded man, Stewart is a self-described "Reagan refugee" who fled Washington D.C. for the tip of Cape Cod fifteen years ago. He's never had a moment of regret. And he's not alone. "People are always moving here," he says. "P'town is a remarkable place to live but a sacrifice is made to live here. Once winter comes, you have to really want to be here. That's where our spirit of community comes through. The town embraces and welcomes people living with HIV. The message given is 'What can we do to help you live here?'"

All of this came as no surprise to myself. Since my first visit to Provincetown in November 1976, I had returned about a hundred times — and yearned to live there. During the chaotic eighties, P'town was a great escape from the grind of corporate life. The summer town with everything: beaches, boys and culture, too! After my HIV-positive diagnosis and subsequent retirement, P'town assumed a greater and more meaningful role in my life. I became one of many writers and artists who for decades have been inexorably drawn to the nurturing power of P'town, to the stark contrast of summer's exhilaration and winter's palpable stillness.

In a recent letter to the *Provincetown Advocate*, P'town resident Alice Joseph put it succinctly: "Provincetown is the last outpost of the individual. It is not only for the beaches and the quality of light that so many artists and writers have lived here. It is the town's emotional climate of freedom and tolerance." Of course, it's not just artists and writers who treasure P'town's uniqueness — it's virtually everyone. In summer, the town's year-round population of 3,000 swells ten-fold with lesbians and gay men from all over the U.S. and abroad. There's a friendly, if crowded, co-existence with the many "traditional" families who drive to the end of the Cape as day-trippers.

Yes, the attractions — and distractions — of a Provincetown summer are well-known. But there's another Provincetown story: in some ways, an even brighter one, in other ways, darker. It's not widely known

what a vital, year-round community Provincetown is. Far from being a bleak, solitary place in winter, lesbians and gay men have formed a bond that makes P'town much more than a gay playground. Not only is Provincetown's artistic community as provocative as ever, but the town's response and adjustment to AIDS has been poignant and powerful. People living with HIV have put down roots in Provincetown, many having been frequent summer visitors over the years. Astonishingly, P'town has the second-highest number of people with AIDS per capita in the country. They have built effective, self-empowering organizations modeled on those in much larger cities.

Provincetown AIDS Support Group (PASG)

At its most basic level, PASG is the "GMHC of Provincetown," providing a great many essential services to clients via a paid staff and dedicated volunteers. But lacking the resources and funding channels available in a big city, PASG is as scrappy and innovative as the community it serves. Executive Director Len Stewart heads up a staff of eleven and can call upon 125 volunteers — a virtual army in a town as small as P'town. He stresses that PASG has clients not just in Provincetown but in nearly every Cape Cod town. Himself a former volunteer and subsequent case manager, Stewart notes that "we are in partnership with our consumers, not just providing services to them. Each person's need is different, so we work as much as we can within an adaptable and accommodating framework. Like everywhere else, persons living with HIV in Provincetown have a high level of awareness of treatment issues and options. We respect that. Our job is to make life easier — to be there."

One PASG flier lists over thirty vital services ranging from anonymous testing referrals and homemaker care to legal service referrals. But two of PASG's more "high profile" programs are its daily transportation of clients to Boston medical appointments and its "afternoon dish" lunches delivered to homebound clients.

Each weekday, two PASG-owned vans set out from Provincetown to Boston with clients en route to see their doctors. The vans, driven by volunteers who commit one day per month, stop to pick up people all over the Cape. At day's end, all are returned safely home. "This is an extraordinary service," declares Len Stewart, "literally 'driven' by volunteers. Taking clients to medical appointments in Boston removes distance as an inhibiting factors in living on the Cape."



The Swim For Life -- from Long Point Light across Provincetown Harbor

To ensure that nutritious food is available to home-bound clients, PASG runs a Monday-thru-Friday lunch delivery program. Similar in concept to New York's God's Love We Deliver, a PASG staffer coordinates two P'town delivery routes. PASG also maintains a food pantry available to clients and every Tuesday evening hosts a "congregant dinner" prepared by volunteer professional chefs at its headquarters. This has become a popular weekly event for clients and their friends.

One of PASG's more novel — and highly appreciated — services is a massage and accupressure program. Local licensed practitioners are paid directly by PASG with each client responsible for just a \$5 co-payment. "This is both a tangible and intangible benefit," says Stewart, "because the healing qualities of physical touch nurture and support a client's spiritual or emotional comfort."

Of special concern to Len Stewart and PASG is the issue of affordable housing for people living with AIDS. "Because P'town is so tourism-dependent, the local economy is cyclical — with some lean winter months. Despite great community efforts to ensure nutrition and creature comforts, some PWAs are on the edge of homelessness." Stewart, who serves as chairman of the town's Housing Authority, says P'town has taken a giant step in addressing this problem. In December, the first residential facility for people with AIDS, Foley House, opened. The brand new building, constructed with both government and private funding, has ten initial units of affordable housing. "Foley House is an enormously important achievement," Stewart says. "It symbolizes Provincetown's commitment to helping people with AIDS live with dignity, compassion — and security. If people can't find that in P'town, where on earth can they find it?"

Provincetown Positive/PWA Coalition

"Self-empowerment for People Living With AIDS is based on two principles: those most directly affected by AIDS/HIV have a right to a voice, and that using our voice has intrinsic healing power."

That's the emphatic credo prominent in every issue of *Provincetown Positive*, the monthly newsletter of Provincetown Positive/PWA Coalition. Readers familiar with the work of Body Positive in New York will see many similar elements in P'town's counterpart. PP/PWA Coalition is driven by HIV+ individuals and concerned persons in the community. Its primary goal is to investigate and provide information on and access to all current developments in treatment and research on HIV. Its resource library, computer search service and extensive collection of videos provide up-to-the-minute information about HIV, drugs, treatments and trials.

Like Body Positive, PP/PWA Coalition runs educational seminars on safer-sex issues, transmission prevention, health plan monitoring and pressing medical issues. The Coalition also has a weekly "drop-in" HIV+ only peer-led rap group.

Ironically, for me to understand what makes PP/PWA Coalition distinctive, how it helps people live more fully, I had to read an obituary. *The Provincetown Advocate*, in July, reported the death of Mark Bulman, an artist and AIDS activist. The piece said that his first solo art show was held last fall at the People With AIDS Coalition gallery in P'town and that he helped establish the Coalition's Arts Project. Intrigued, I contacted Jim

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Rann, immediate past president of PP/PWA Coalition. It was clear that something novel and important was being done in Provincetown, by and for artists living with AIDS.

Jim and I met for coffee in late summer at Dodie's, a small "retro" diner in P'town's east end. A 23 year resident and Provincetown stalwart, Jim is the proprietor of Waves Salon, and is an artist. He talked a bit about the Coalition's early history. In 1987, there was a controversy about the failure of local clinics to provide access to pantamidine. The collective frustration of people with HIV and AIDS led to a dramatic "die-in" at the Outer Cape Health Facility. This event successfully dramatized the issue and formed a bond among P'town's AIDS community which expressed itself via Provincetown Positive/PWA Coalition.

New York's Body Positive and Provincetown Positive have a "spiritual link" through Paul Wychules who served as BP's executive director and as an early Coalition board member. Jim Rann notes that Paul lived

in P'town both before and after his service to Body Positive in New York.

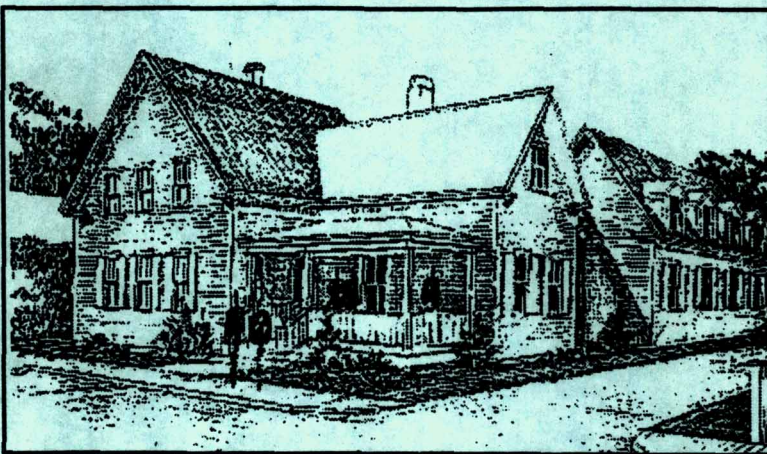
In 1989, the Coalition Arts Project was born. Its mandate was to nurture the creative impulses and aspirations of artists and writers living with HIV and AIDS. In addition to providing a forum and showcase for work, the CAP actually awards monthly financial stipends to artists, to ease monetary considerations as an impediment to getting work out. Dozens of painters, photographers, dancers, writers and other artists have benefitted from this novel program.

Rann explained the philosophy behind it. "Simply put, we feel that creativity keeps you going. Bodily functions are stimulated actually. Early on, we recognized that artists wanted to do something, in some cases to combine art with activism, in others just to combine daily living with creative expression. It seemed right, indeed necessary, to devise a way of supporting artists, to embrace them, to validate both the artist and the art." The Coalition Arts Project has had a profound effect on Provincetown, notes Rann, both within and outside the AIDS community. Starting with 1989's Erotic Art Show, the work of CAP artists is annually showcased in a high-profile, high-impact exhibit. Performing artists and writers get their share of the spotlight and support — the CAP has helped a number of writers purchase computers.

Change — And Partnership

In Provincetown, after Labor Day, a "period of adjustment," to winter sets in. A kind of island mentality settles over the year-rounders, who welcome the respite from summer's round-the-clock pace. In winter what Provincetown represents to a person living with AIDS is most apparent. There's no big-city impersonal climate. There are no intimidating government or medical bureaucracies to maneuver your way through. There are simply people who care about you.

For nearly ten years, the Provincetown AIDS Support Group and Provincetown Positive/PWA Coalition have co-existed, staking out complementary, but distinct roles. PASG serves many of the physical,



Foley House, Provincetown's first residential facility for PWAs.

This Fall, the Coalition announced some key changes in the way it delivers its services, prompted by the re-location to San Diego of its long-time office manager. To conserve money by lowering fixed overhead expenses, the organization is closing its Commercial Street office and creating a "Coalition Without Walls." All projects and services remain intact but will be administered by officers, board members and volunteers from various locations throughout P'town. Most notably, the PP/PWA Coalition Library and Resource Center will be moved to the Provincetown AIDS Support Group office. The library is being expanded and already features extensive information on treatment options, therapy, policy and political questions, experimental protocols, care concerns, spiritual awareness, laboratory procedures and more.

All of this makes one thing compellingly clear: if you know Provincetown only in its role as a summer resort, you only know half the town! From Labor Day to Memorial Day, P'town, like any other town, struggles with an unwelcome visitor in its midst, a scourge which has claimed individual lives but has no power over life itself.

The writer Mary Heaton Vorse compares Provincetown to an onion. It has many different people, each a separate layer, but all tightly packed into three

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nutritional, social and shelter needs of its clients. The Coalition has a less formal, somewhat universal mission, nurturing the creative impulse, providing emotional support, furnishing a wealth of information — and being an unyielding advocate. Of course, there's some overlap between the organizations, but it's harmonious and people-focused. In fact, both organizations share in the proceeds of two high-profile annual fundraisers, PASG's Labor Day Auction and the "Swim For Life."

miles of sand surrounded by water. The only reason it works is tolerance.

You need not be in Provincetown very long, in summer or in winter, to find out that she's right. ■

(Dennis Rhodes, a BP volunteer and Board member, is a poet and short story writer whose work has appeared in WHAT?, The Aquarian and Our Lives. He is a two-time winner of the William Carlos Williams Poetry Center competition.)