

SUMMER OF '91

Provincetown Cape Care

'Service to the client' is the number one concern of Provincetown's AIDS Support Group

by Peter Erbland

Although Cape Cod can seem isolated from Boston and its state-of-the-art hospitals, people with AIDS do not feel the effects of that isolation thanks to the work of the Provincetown AIDS Support Group.

The Support Group, founded in 1983, was formed after a local man was diagnosed with a mysterious illness that had just been officially named Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. At a meeting held to discuss this new disease, Alice Foley, the Provincetown Town Nurse, "bumped into" Preston Babbitt. And out of this, something very special grew.

"We had a fundraiser because our major problem was getting people up to Boston for the infectious disease units at the large hospitals," said co-founder Foley. "We raised \$480 and we thought we'd died and gone to heaven."

Now, with a paid staff of two, a \$155,000 a year budget, and a team of volunteers, the Support Group provides basic AIDS case management, services, and referrals up and down the Cape.

"We're a total service organization and

all our thinking and orientation goes toward service to the client," explained Foley.

These services include a "nonreimbursable fund" for things not covered by Medicaid, including acupuncture, massage, Chinese herbs, veterinarians' bills, hobbies, and almost anything else.

"Someone who's really into music we buy CDs for them. There's a guy down here with a fish tank and we pay for that," said Foley, adding that clients receive a certain amount reimbursed each month.

"We figure the money is raised for PWAs so we try to minimize the administrative skim off that. That's why the money we get from the state is so important."

In the intervening eight years, co-founder Babbitt has died and that first case has grown to a client base of 76, the majority live in Provincetown. This does not include the additional clients from Boston who are spending the summer in Provincetown, said advocate Irene Rabinowitz.



The AIDS candlelight vigil, May 19 in front of the Provincetown Town Hall, sponsored by the Provincetown AIDS Support Group. Photo: Cornelia Walsh

'Centerpiece' of the services

However, the centerpiece of the AIDS Support Group is still the daily shuttle from Provincetown to Boston. Each weekday, the van—driven by volunteers—takes clients the 115 miles from the tip of the Cape to New England Deaconess, Massachusetts General, and Brigham and Women's Hospitals.

"We're on our second van," noted Rabinowitz, who said that they put 4000 to 5000 miles on the van each month. The

first van, which has been retired, had over 100,000 miles by the end of its second year.

Although the Boston shuttle has been at the core of the organization's programs, grants from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health have also enabled the Support Group to provide home-based care for the Cape's PWAs.

For A Decade In Provincetown, AIDS Has Been 'Our' Disease

By Laura J. MacKay
Bureau Chief

Basketball superstar Magic Johnson's announcement last Thursday that he had tested positive for HIV, the AIDS virus, jolted the country from coast to coast, and Cape Cod was no exception.

Regional AIDS service and health organizations are hopeful that the immensely popular athlete's revelation will drive home the fact AIDS is not just a gay disease, and that Magic's frank, calm approach to his diagnosis will at last bring AIDS out of the closet.

"Nothing like this has ever happened....More and more people are going to see themselves at risk," says Jason Schneider, a client advocate at the Cape Cod AIDS Council in Hyannis. "Last Wednesday this was primarily an IV (intravenous) drug users' and gay men's disease. Friday morning, all of a sudden it's not *their* disease, it's *our* disease."

Consequently, the council's phone inquiries tripled last Friday, Mr Schneider said. On Tuesday, following the long weekend, the ringing resumed as soon as the office opened.

"We've been getting just unbelievable questions," Mr Schneider said as he was interrupted by someone seeking information. "People have called and said, 'I'm not gay, but...' or 'I've never used needles, but...'"

Many callers are people whose family members have tested HIV positive or have developed AIDS, he said, and who want counseling. "For some of these people, AIDS is not something they've been able to talk about....It's heartening."

But in Provincetown, with its large gay population, AIDS is old news and everyday life. Curious or panicked phone calls have been few. The Provincetown AIDS Support Group (PASG) noted a few additional inquiries about testing for the virus, while Outer Cape Health's Provincetown office reported no noticeable increase in questions about AIDS.

"The population out here tends to be pretty well informed," says Scott Penn, executive director of Outer Cape Health.

It has come by its knowledge the hard way: at least 90 people have died of AIDS in Provincetown in the last five years. Here, AIDS has always been "our disease," and wears the face of family, friends and neighbors.

So when Provincetown hears Magic Johnson saying he has contracted the AIDS virus, there is recognition and deep empathy.

"More than most communities, we understand the situation he's in," Provincetown Selectman Lee Robinson said at Tuesday's board meeting. He encouraged his colleagues to write a letter to Magic to let him know that Provincetown "applauds his courage and dignity" and that he is "in residents' thoughts and prayers."

The board immediately agreed to the idea, and just as quickly approved a letter composed by chairman of selectmen Elizabeth Steele to President George Bush, the surgeon general, the secretary general of the United Nations, and others.

Emphasizing that even a town as compassionate toward people with AIDS as Provincetown has been — the flow of residents' money and volunteer hours never runs dry — can only do so much, the letter implores that more effort be dedicated to combatting AIDS on a national and international scale.

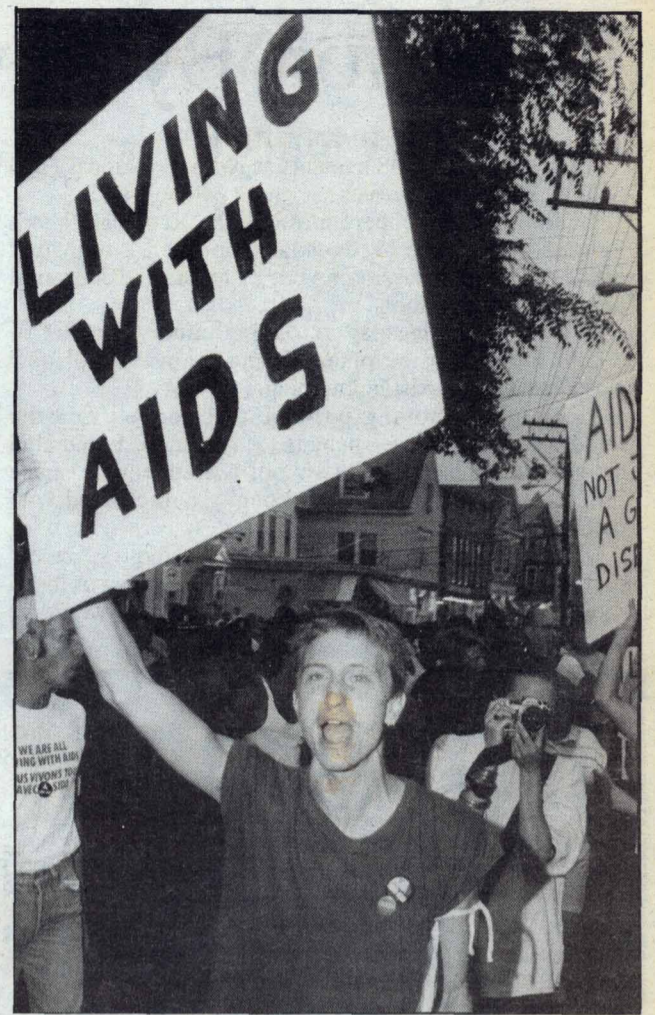
While many people find the recent news media attention to AIDS encouraging, those who have been battling the virus for a decade also express frustration. In short: what took so long?

"They should have woken up 10 years ago," when AIDS was first identified as a killer, says Jimmy Rann, president of the Provincetown Positive People with AIDS Coalition.

"We've been trying for years to get people to listen," says Bill Furdin, a case manager at the Provincetown AIDS Support Group (PASG). "We're 10 years into the disease and they can't even put a condom on television."

But as a result of Magic Johnson's bold announcement, progress is already in evidence: *The Today Show* fought off condom queasiness Tuesday to televise a demonstration on how to use the potentially life-saving device.

Magic's diagnosis is of course unfortunate, but, as Mr Penn observes, "God works in mysterious ways....If it takes Magic Johnson to have (*Today Show* anchor) Katie Couric show America how to put on a condom, then there's some good in it."



A protester during a march in Provincetown two years ago.

TCC/DONAHUE

Jimmy Rann, Magic Also Share An Upbeat Attitude Toward Life

By Laura J. MacKay
Bureau Chief

Jimmy Rann has two things in common with basketball superstar Magic Johnson: his hometown of Lansing, Michigan, and his HIV status.

The two also share a positive approach to facing life with the virus that causes AIDS. While many people were surprised at Magic's upbeat attitude when he announced at a press conference last Thursday that he had contracted the deadly virus, Mr Rann wasn't one of them.

"I don't believe that it's a death sentence," says the Provincetown resident, who is also president of the

Provincetown Positive People With AIDS Coalition.

But people who are HIV positive — and, by definition, asymptomatic — can't take action to stave off the onset of full-blown AIDS if they don't know they have the virus. That's where testing comes in.

Mr Rann can vouch for the benefit of determining one's HIV status as early as possible and then doing something about it. He is one of the many people who contracted the virus years ago — he says he thinks he was exposed around 1984 — and remain relatively healthy.

Mr Rann did something about it by participating in an experimental drug trial that appears to have stabilized his health. Magic Johnson has already done something about it by following his doctor's advice to quit pro basketball in order to reduce stress on his body.

Getting tested for the AIDS virus is easy in Massachusetts. Through the Anonymous Test Site (ATS) program, anyone can call 617-727-6971 for information about the nearest place in the state to obtain free, anonymous HIV testing and counseling. The ATS line is staffed Mondays from 4 to 6 pm, Tuesdays noon to 4 pm, Wednesdays 1 to 3 pm, Thursdays noon to 3 pm and Fridays 9 am to noon.

Outer Cape Health in Provincetown is one designated ATS. While encouraging appointments, executive director Scott Penn says walk-ins are welcome on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Tests are always preceded by counseling.

Bill Furdin, a case manager at the Provincetown AIDS Support Group (PASG), says the PASG always encourages people to be tested anonymously, rather than by their doctors. Tests performed by a doctor become part of a person's medical record, and a recorded HIV positive status can lead insurance companies to deny coverage, he warns.

Just what does the test do?

As Mr Furdin explains, an HIV test detects not the AIDS virus itself, but the presence of specific antibodies produced by the immune system as it attempts to fend off the virus. It is important to understand that the antibodies don't show up until about six months after the AIDS virus invades the body. People often take the test twice, six months apart, avoiding any potential contact with the virus — and any possibility of spreading it — during those six months.

When a person is HIV positive, the AIDS virus has begun to attach itself to the white blood cells (called the T-4 cells) that run the entire immune system. It proceeds to break down the immune system, making the body dangerously vulnerable to all kinds of common infections that people can ordinarily fend off. In AIDS-afflicted children, chicken pox is a constant threat, Mr Furdin says. In adults with AIDS, pneumonia is a killer. When one of

A Somber View From Provincetown To L.A.

By Doug Bergen

Seven per cent of the population of Provincetown has tested positive for the HIV virus that causes AIDS. Another 1.5 million infected Americans can be found as one heads west from this outpost in the Atlantic Ocean.

But the infection of one individual from the Pacific Coast has drawn, it seems, more attention in one week than all the rest put together.

Magic Johnson announced last week that he is HIV positive. The Los Angeles Lakers phenomenon now must live with the possibility that he will die from AIDS.

In places like Provincetown, where AIDS is a neighbor, any kind of increased awareness is welcome. But at the same time they've heard this song before. A celebrity contracts the virus and the nation becomes deeply concerned about the spread of the disease for what...a month...a week...a few days...a few sound bytes?

Maybe it will be different with Magic, who has promised now to devote his life to preaching the gospel of safe sex.

Amid a dismal downpour on Veterans Day in Provincetown, a few veterans of a different war talked about believing and not believing in Magic.

"I was very proud of him to talk about it publicly at that stage," said Irene Rabinowitz, Provincetown selectman and leader of the Provincetown AIDS Support Group. "I think it's a fantastic opportunity."

But at the same time she offered, "I think it's really sad that millions in the world are being ignored, while celebrities receive all this outpouring of love and affection."

"I hope the attention doesn't go off the people in the inner cities and the babies."

Selectman Rabinowitz was at an AIDS support conference in Rhode Island when Magic Johnson made his announcement and she said the consensus was that he had done "a wonderful brave thing." But with the tempering influence of experience, she added, "We hope it doesn't go away."

Alice Foley, Provincetown's public health director and a founder of the Provincetown AIDS Support Group, also supports Magic Johnson's promised mission while maintaining a skepticism about it.

"My own personal opinion is that it won't have an impact until a nice lily white businessman gets it," she said. "And I say 'man,' because a woman could never create the same reaction."

Miss Foley pointed to Magic Johnson's appearance on the *Arsenio Hall Show* and noted his statement to the host that, "I'm no homosexual. You know that, man." The statement was received with a round of applause.

"Listening to that remark," said Miss Foley, who deals with a largely gay population, "I asked, 'What does that mean?'"

Does it mean to the clapping audience that Magic Johnson would be less of a person if he were homosexual? Does it mean that stopping the spread of the disease would take on greater importance if it killed more rich white businessmen?

Elise Bowen, a member of the Provincetown grassroots group ACT UP, feels no such ambivalence about Magic Johnson. To her, there's nothing ambivalent about AIDS.

"Prior to Magic Johnson's announcement, the

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