

Poignant AIDS documentary to premiere during Heritage Day

By Pru Sowers

BANNER STAFF

PROVINCETOWN — Unthinkable as it is now, the early response of the nation to AIDS patients was, at best, to ignore them and, at worse, to shun them.

However, in Provincetown, a community-based support system began that eventually became a model for the rest of the country. That struggle is the focus of a documentary short video, "Safe Harbor: Provincetown Responds to AIDS, 1983-1993," that will premiere this Sunday, June 14, at Provincetown Public Library's fifth annual Heritage Day. The free screening will take place at 3 p.m. in the Marc Jacobs Reading Room on the library's first floor. After the premiere, the 20-minute video will show on a loop in a kiosk on the library's second floor.

The video, directed and edited by Catherine Russo, is devastating in its interviews of people who remember how the as-yet-unnamed illness began killing gay men, seemingly overnight.

"One day everybody was at tea dance drinking and having a good time. And like a week later, people just started to die," remembers therapist Katina Rodis in the documentary.



A scene of an AIDS memorial service on a Provincetown beach that took place during the worst decade of the epidemic here, 1983-1993. That decade is the focus of a new documentary that will premiere this Sunday at the Provincetown Library.

The Centers for Disease Control issued the first warning about a rare form of pneumonia affecting a small group of gay men in Los Angeles on June 5, 1981. It established the term "Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome" (AIDS) in 1982. But in Provincetown, gay men were coming down with symptoms as early as 1978.

"If you were a gay man, you didn't know if you were going to get sick or not or if you were going to get AIDS or not," said Alan Wagg, one of the initial organizers of the Provincetown AIDS Support Group, which eventually evolved into the AIDS Support Group of Cape Cod.

"There was a whole concern about the identity of the town.

There was a concern about the economy of the town. And it was true. I was involved in the whale watch business at the time. And people would call up in the '80s and they would ask, 'Are there any gay people working on the boat,'" said Jay Critchley, a local resident and organizer of the Swim for Life, initially an AIDS fundraiser.

PHOTO COURTESY PROVINCETOWN LIBRARY

Once it was discovered that AIDS was passed through blood to blood transmission, Provincetown rallied to care for not only its long-time locals but for the countless infected men who came to Provincetown because there was simply nowhere else to go. An elderly Amelia Carlos, who owned Amelia's Little Cottages, has one of the most haunting quotes in the film.

"I've seen people here do wonderful things for these AIDS patients who used to come here to die. They had no one to take care of them so they came here and people were very good to them, fed them and took care of them," she said.

The film was sponsored by the library board of trustees and produced by Russo, trustee Mick Rudd and Mary Nicolini, assistant library director. The script committee for the film, drawn from volunteers and staff of the AIDS Support Group of Cape Cod in Provincetown, including executive director Laura Thornton, identified and located people who were involved with AIDS in the early years of the crisis. The committee then examined more than 20 hours of interview transcripts to select portions that would most effectively tell the story.

Cape Cod Times

Town's compassion on film

Short documentary focuses on how Provincetown dealt with the early years of AIDS infections.

By **MARY ANN BRAGG**
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PROVINCETOWN – During the early years of the AIDS virus, this coastal tourist town opened its arms to anyone who needed a home, food, a kind word or gentle touch.

Now, townspeople have created a short documentary of those years that they hope maintains the same open-heartedness.

“Safe Harbor,” a 20-minute film about the Provincetown community’s response to AIDS from 1983 to 1993, premieres tomorrow at the public library. The film uses photographs, newspaper clips, art and first-person accounts to tell how Provincetown rose to the occasion at a time when federal officials remained largely silent.

The images in the film linger. In

one photograph, a man with skeletal cheekbones, covered with an afghan, is turned on a couch by two helpers. Brown lesions that look like a spray of leeches cover another man’s bare back. A third man’s tanned face, smile and shag haircut seem frozen in time, as though a last picture of health.

This video, made with \$12,500 in local grants, isn’t meant to be just a “parochial scrapbook” of the town’s past, said library trustee and creator Mick Rudd. The goal was to give visitors to Provincetown – perhaps a family from the Midwest – who wander into the library a good sense of the town’s contribution to fighting AIDS.

“We had to give them enough information in the video so that they would understand,” Rudd said.

The HIV virus was first identified in the United States in 1981 after a number of gay men started getting sick with a rare type of cancer, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Scientists then took several years to develop a

“SAFE HARBOR”

- 3 p.m. tomorrow
- Provincetown Public Library
- 356 Commercial St.
- 508-487-7094
- Free
- Unable to attend? The film will be available at the library’s video kiosk as part of its permanent collection.

test for the virus, to understand how it was transmitted between humans and to determine what people can do to protect themselves.

AIDS stands for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, and it is the final stage of HIV infection.

About 160 people died of AIDS in Provincetown from 1983 to 1993, said Laura Thornton of the AIDS Support Group of Cape Cod.

The support group, known then

as the Provincetown AIDS Support Group, was one of the country’s first to respond to the disease. It opened its doors in 1983.

Early and innovative medical care was available in Provincetown along with round-the-clock emotional and physical support, according to AIDS workers and survivors in the film.

It was period, too, when AIDS patients learned to stand up for themselves and ask questions of health care officials, said AIDS survivor Jim Rann, who appears in the film.

“We were going through a difficult, horrible time,” Rann said. “Seeing people that we knew in pain and dying. Provincetown didn’t run away.”

The town, with a year-round population of 3,400, continues to have the highest percentage of people living with the HIV virus or AIDS in Massachusetts, per 100,000 population, state records indicated.

About 310 people in Provincetown had the HIV virus or AIDS at the end of 2007.