

Nurse at forefront of battle vs. AIDS

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Committee calls Foley 'inspiration'

By HAMILTON KAHN
STAFF WRITER

PROVINCETOWN — Alice Foley says she came to Provincetown 20 years ago because she was "burnt out on nursing."

But she instead found her life's calling not only as a nurse, but also as a warrior on the front lines in the war against AIDS.

Because of her ongoing efforts, Ms. Foley will receive an award from the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts Inc., New England's largest AIDS service and education organization. Ms. Foley and 13 other recipients will be honored at a banquet Feb. 1 at the Westin Hotel in Boston.

The award recipients "give us all cause for hope," said Larry Kessler, executive director of the AIDS Action Committee, in a press release. "Their selfless dedication to other human beings should serve as an inspiration to all of society."

Originally from Cambridge, Ms. Foley says she was "burnt out on nursing" when she quit and drove a cab in Boston for a year before coming to Provincetown in 1971 to work as a bartender.

But she soon found her skills as a trained psychiatric nurse in demand at the town's former Drop-In Center, and today she is Provincetown public health director, although she prefers the title "town nurse."

She is also leader of the state's oldest AIDS-service organization, the Provincetown AIDS Support Group, which she co-founded in 1982 with the late Preston Babbitt.

The organization currently provides a wide range of services to HIV and AIDS patients, including

transportation to medical facilities on- and off-Cape, meal delivery to house-bound patients, and AIDS education projects in Cape schools.

"I've been in nursing 43 years now," Ms. Foley says. "I'll be 60 years old my next birthday, in May. And I have had what I think is a remarkable career in nursing. I've done a lot of things . . . but this (AIDS) nursing is very, very challenging. And very exciting, because it is new."

On the other hand, she's seen a lot of clients die, while the number of people seeking her services has increased dramatically. Three years ago, the support group had 15 clients; now there are 96.

"It's not discouraging," she says. "It's terribly, terribly sad. Then I read in The New York Times that President Bush says, 'Gee, I wish someone could tell us what more we could do.' What, are you kidding me?"

She works hard at keeping up with the most current medical information on HIV and AIDS, largely to dispel rumors about miracle cures. Just last week, the support group flew in Dr. Timothy Cooley and nurse Nancy Reinhalter to talk about a new anti-viral drug, Compound 3TC, being tested on HIV patients at Boston City Hospital.

With pride, Ms. Foley says her visitors seemed impressed with the questions they got from what she calls "our very sophisticated group of clients."

She also has praise for the support group's three-person staff, and the two others who work with her at the town nurses' office.

"I look good because of the staff I work with," she says, noting that her strong personality can some-



Staff Photo by HAMILTON KAHN

■ Alice Foley will receive an award from the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts Inc.

times cause friction. "I know I'm not the favorite person of a lot of people."

Support group case manager Irene Rabinowitz, a Provincetown selectman, says that Ms. Foley has provided strong leadership by emphasizing the need to provide people in a rural outpost with access to preventative health care.

"She's given encouragement to people with AIDS — they're not here to die, they're living with an illness, and preventative medical care can prolong their lives," Ms. Rabinowitz says. "She's always fought for that."

As the threat of AIDS grows along with public awareness, Ms.

Foley says she's disturbed by what she sees as the continued social stigmatization of gay men with AIDS — perhaps best symbolized by the applause given to Magic Johnson when he proclaimed on the "Arsenio Hall Show" that he is not homosexual.

For even though the disease has spread throughout all segments of the global population, on Cape Cod the great majority of HIV and AIDS patients are gay men, she says.

"We do deal with homosexuals," she says. "I don't make any apologies for that. We serve all of Barnstable County. We would never refuse services to anyone."

Foley Takes On AIDS Challenges As Full-Time Job

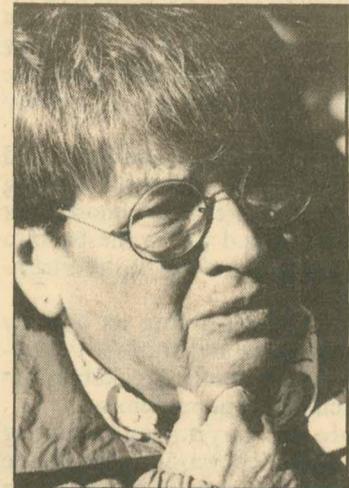
Need Reaches Record High

By K.C. Myers

In a testament to increasing activity at the Provincetown AIDS Support Group, Alice Foley last week gave up her full-time position as Provincetown town nurse to take on AIDS work full time.

For the past five years, Ms. Foley was reportedly working only 10 hours a week as executive director of the AIDS Support Group, a group she formed out of the back seat of her car in the mid-1980s. She spent another 40 hours working with elderly and low-income residents who required the town-funded medical help of the town nurse.

Ms. Foley said the town still needs a nurse, but the AIDS support group needs her more. The number of clients has increased to its largest ever — 140. With AIDS patients living more years with the disease than they have in the past, the demand for help keeps increasing.



Alice Foley, 62, retired last week as town nurse to take over as executive director of the Provincetown AIDS Support Group.

Staff Photo by Barry Donahue

A seven-member paid staff has replaced the once all-volunteer group. More so than ever, the rest of the Cape is looking to the support group for services.

"We're seeing a lot more from the Mid-Cape region," said Ms. Foley. "The numbers keep escalating and the types of clients are changing. They are getting younger. AIDS is totally out of control."

Ms. Foley, 62, has been a nurse for 42 years. During the 1970s, she led the Provincetown Drop-In Center, which oversaw drug-induced medical emergencies. After that she was the nurse at the Charles Street jail in Boston.

But nothing prepared her for AIDS.

"It is a terrible disease," she said. "But I've learned more about courage and facing death with dignity from these men, and I say men because most of our clients are men, than in all my 42 years of nursing."

From the time she first began dealing with AIDS in the early 1980s, when it was still called "gay cancer" or "gay-related immune deficiency syndrome" until today, she's known more than 160 people who have died.

"It doesn't get any easier with time," she said. "And I wouldn't want to develop a technique to steal myself against it."

Ms. Foley came to Provincetown in the early 1970s. Fresh out of a long-term relationship and burnt out from teaching nursing at the University of Massachusetts, she came to tend bar.

When the first AIDS patient was referred to Provincetown — a town supportive to gay people — from a Boston hospital, Ms. Foley was running her own restaurant and serving as president of the Provincetown Business Guild.

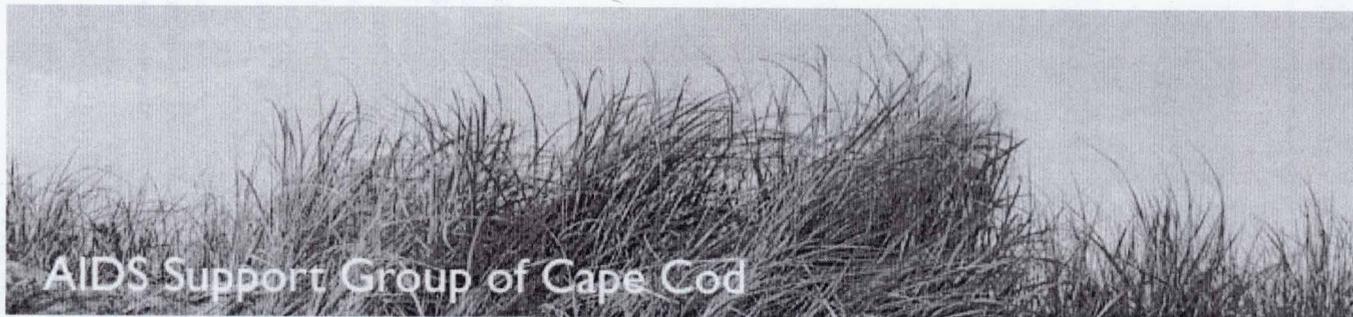
She and another member of the guild, Preston Babbitt — who later died of AIDS — were alarmed by the referral. It occurred in November, a bad time to meet new people in Provincetown. Together they set up a network of support to help others who might be getting sick.

"The gay community was aware that something was out there," she said. "Little by little we began to hear about more and more illnesses."

Ever since the beginning, her goal has been to keep sick people at home. Of the 160 deaths, about 12 died in the hospital, she said. "It's healthier and cheaper to keep them at home. And the volunteers from the support group have been able to care for them at home, often around the clock.

"As one young man who has since died, said, 'I know you can't take away my burden, but occasionally you can help me shift around the weight,'" she said. "We can't fix HIV, but what else is broken that we can possibly fix? That is how I see our mission."





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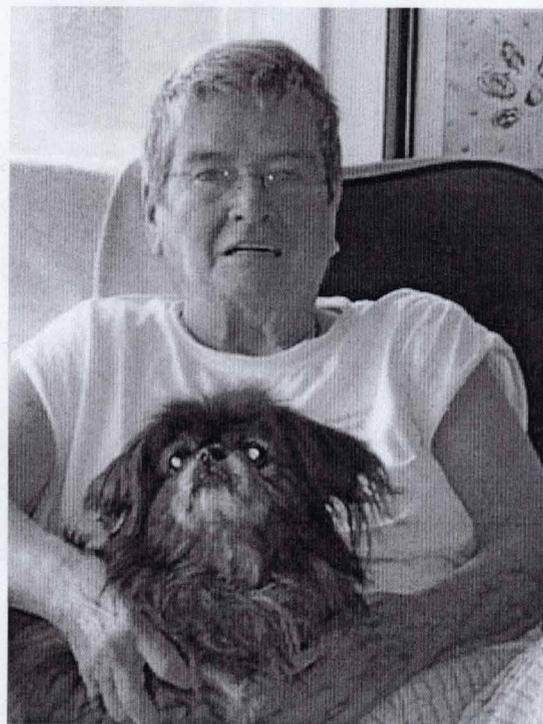


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Founder, Provincetown AIDS Support Group

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