I began my official association with the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont in the very first Walks for Life. You could simply show up. And walk. Which perfectly suited my severely underdeveloped social skills.

It is downright funny — to me, at least — at this particular juncture in my life to peer backwards down that road to look at myself and recognize that walking out of the Price Chopper parking lot that first time was a step directly into my future. My future social circle, future community, future profession. My future world.

HIV/AIDS work was my first job out of college in 1992, and it is my current work today. I’ve been blessed to spend the last 13 consecutive years working in HIV prevention and on HIV-related project management. Today, I am ecstatic to be on contract with the state of Vermont, as the HIV Community Planning Coordinator for the Department of Health.

And I walked here, to where I am today, walking with the AIDS Project. I’m far from the only person here today who has walked in parallel and intersecting paths alongside the AIDS Project throughout its existence. We are an agency that fosters long time relationships.

I definitely have not been to every walk. I’m not even certain how many I have been to. Some years it was simple conflicts with the date. Other years I’ve needed to walk away rather than walk with — something the Project has always understood better than any other organization I’ve been affiliated with.

The agency “lets go” so warmly and freely, and “welcomes back” more smoothly and with more heart than anywhere else I’ve been.

I clearly remember those early parking lot gatherings before the walk kicked off and the words just before we started off, of how to respond if we encountered negative reactions along the route to the Common.

By contrast, I have only very vague recollections of the walking itself. At that time the walks were more individual experiences in anxiety and fear for me than a community event of remembrance and support.

I came to the walks alone for a variety of reasons. I was focused inward, and looking at my feet a lot, far too aware of that looming possibility of the negative reaction. It was always a relief to reach the Common and find a tree to sit against to hide from the sun and all
Walking with the AIDS Project, continued from page 1

the people I didn’t know.
I’d debate leaving then or staying longer.
Staying to hear the names of my community members I would never meet, those I had missed to an early death.
I clearly remember going home angry.
I don’t know if I would have been less anxious or more if I’d known I was literally finding my future along the paths of those walks. Possibly more. But had I understood that, at the same time, I was connecting with an organization that would wrap around that future me, in that future world, and walk beside me through my own struggles, I guarantee the anxiety would have been less.

1. Top: Stewart McDermet (on left), a participant in the first Walk for Life in 1988, helps banner carriers David Carr and Shirley Squires lead the 30th anniversary march.
2. Above: Miss Ginger Soulless joins the team from Brown Computer Solutions.
3. Right: Participants carry a variety of messages.
Our syringe services program is making news: “It’s going great.”

Brattleboro Reformer reporter Chris Mays recently wrote about the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont’s syringe services program. Here is his report:

BRATTLEBORO — A local needle exchange has seen a lot of success since its implementation more than a year ago. “It’s going great,” said Sue Conley, prevention program manager, the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont.

“I was concerned about how the community would respond to this program because of the climate we’re in at this point, but we haven’t had any pushback from anybody. The more people understand about the reasons and the benefits of a syringe services program, the more I think they’ll understand that it’s more than just handing out needles.”

More than 100 members are signed up for the free and anonymous service, Conley said. The program started in Brattleboro at 15 Grove St. in September 2016 after a previous version shut down in 2005.

Conley believes the needle exchange has been well received. She pointed at outreach efforts and the message getting out via word of mouth by members as reasons for its success.

“I think a lot of people’s apprehension about coming to a needle exchange, if it’s new, is what to expect — what will happen, and making sure they can trust whoever they are working with,” she said. “I developed relationships with people and in those relationships, people began to trust me and they start to tell people, ‘It’s OK to go there. Nothing’s going to happen.’”

Another positive indicator, Conley said, is the increased number of hours the program is available. Now, members can go every Tuesday from 9 a.m. to noon. Previously, hours were kept only on the first and third Tuesday.

Conley said she exceeded her objective with the state, which was a 5 percent increase each quarter. Members are mostly from Windham County but a few have come from other nearby states.

“Like any new program or anything starting out, it’s going to be slow at first,” Conley said. “People need to know about it. They need to hear about it through many forms of communication.”

To that end, Conley has talked to different groups and served on community panels.

“It helps people to use clean needles to prevent HIV and Hepatitis C,” she said. “It also helps people who use in isolation to have one person they see on a regular basis.”

Members are asked about their health and whether they have been tested or immunized. Referrals for treatment can be made.

Choosing Life Empowerment Action and Results, or CLEAR, is a counseling program offered by the APSV and developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“We talk about substance abuse in this program so it’s a nice segue from the syringe service to this program,” Conley said. “It helps develop more of a relationship with people, if they are not ready for treatment.”

Now, her group gives out Naloxone. Also known as Narcan, the medication is intended to reverse opioid overdoses.

“We’re saving lives because people we’ve given it to have literally said they’ve saved lives of people who are overdosing,” Conley said. “All these things contribute to a really rich program in the community.”

At the end of 2014, the CDC had marked Windham County as one of 220 counties across the United States at risk for an HIV epidemic. The needle exchange “was the answer to hoping that doesn’t happen,” Conley said.

Want to learn more?

For more information about this program and other AIDS Project prevention programming, please call Sue at 802-254-4444 x 113.
UPCOMING EVENT

31st Annual AIDS Walk for Life

Join us on May 19 in Brattleboro.

Join us as we honor three decades of effort by community members to support those living with HIV/AIDS and to reduce the risk of HIV transmission in southern Vermont. This year’s Walk is dedicated to Howie Peterson for his ongoing commitment to raising necessary funds for us and keeping HIV in the forefront of our local men’s community.

AIDS Project of Southern Vermont