Ladies of the Rainbow Share Their True Colors

Harmony Birch has reported on the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont’s annual Ladies of the Rainbow drag show for the Brattleboro Reformer. We’re grateful to share her report here.

Years ago, Patrick Brown used to go to the Rainbow Cattle Co. in Dummerston. It was the perfect place, he said, for young gay people to meet. But it was also the home of the Ladies of the Rainbow, a drag show troupe that served as the bar’s primary entertainment.

When the establishment closed, the troupe continued hosting performances all over the region. Then Brown brought an idea forward to the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont: Why not host a drag show fundraiser?

The Ladies were the logical entertainment choice. They’ll be performing their annual holiday benefit show Dec. 1 at the Veterans of Foreign Wars post at 40 Black Mountain Road in Brattleboro.

“They rarely do anything but charity causes,” Brown said. A drag show, he knew, too, would draw a large crowd. The Ladies are accustomed to selling out their shows. It’s the idea of having an alter ego, the raunchy humor, Brown thinks, and the fact that “every drag queen is unique.”

Brown’s spouse, Paul Mekdeci, is one of the newest members of the Ladies. He plays Ginger Soulless and joined the Ladies four years ago. “For me, it’s always been about my love of acting,” Mekdeci said.

He performed in drag for the first time when he was 18, after an actress dropped out of a play he was in.

“I was like, ‘I'll do it,’” Mekdeci said. He dressed up in drag and performed a female role. When he started getting involved with the AIDS Project, he participated in the AIDS Walk for Life. One year, he figured he could raise more money by dressing up in drag, so he did.

And eventually, he found the Ladies. Learning how to perform and dazzle in front of a crowd of hundreds of people helped Mekdeci break out of his shell. He has performed in other theater troupes where the fit wasn’t really right, but with the Ladies, he said he fits right in. “Everybody’s so great,” he said. What appeals to him most about the Ladies is the many charity shows they put on. “They have really big hearts,” he said.

Karen Peterson, executive director of the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont, said the show is a hit every year. It attracts a diverse group of people. “It’s just so much fun,” she said.

Mekdeci said it’s basically a comedy show with musical numbers in between. Seeing men dress up is also a big attraction. “They look better than I do,” Peterson said.

All proceeds from the show go to the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont, which helps support local people living with HIV/AIDS and works to reduce the risk of transmission to others in Windham, Bennington and southern Windsor counties.

The show is not suitable for children. Doors open at 7 p.m. The show starts at 8 p.m. Tickets are $20 per person and $150 for tables of eight. For tickets call 802-254-4444 or purchase them online at aidsprojectsouthernvermont.org.

SAVE THE DATE:
Holiday Drag Show
December 1 at VFW
aidsprojectsouthernvermont.org

Photos: J. Houle
AIDS Project of Southern Vermont

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The mission of the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont is to provide direct services to those whose lives are affected by HIV/AIDS, to offer education to help prevent its spread, and to promote understanding within the communities served.

Vision Statement:
Our community will become a place where new HIV infections are rare and when they do occur, every person, regardless of age, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or socio-economic circumstance, will have unfettered access to high quality, life-extending care, free from stigma and discrimination.

Thank you, Patrick.

The AIDS Project thanks Patrick Brown for six years of board service. We will miss Patrick and his leadership as chair of the Board of Directors.

A note from Patrick: It is hard to believe that it has already been six years since joining the APSV board! In my time on the board, I have had the privilege of working with Karen Peterson, the APSV staff and volunteers. I have seen just how dedicated they are to the community. I’ve thoroughly enjoyed working with past and current board members. I will very much miss being a board member, but plan to continue volunteering to help with events and offer assistance with technology. While I am sad to be leaving the board, I am thrilled that Shawn Bracebridge will be assuming the position of board chair and am confident that he will bring a new energy to the position. I want to thank everyone at the AIDS Project for the opportunity to serve such a meaningful organization!

Welcome, Ellen Wood.

AIDS Project is pleased to announce a new Board member.

A note from Ellen: I work in higher education at Landmark College both in and out of the classroom with students utilizing a universal design approach to education with a focus on embedding health, wellness, and mindfulness as part of my curriculum. As part of my work, I’ve been dedicated to educating the community about the global impact of HIV/AIDS and encouraging students to expand their understanding and ways they can be a part of the solution. Being asked to join the APSV board last spring was a great opportunity to shift my focus to our local community as I had been well aware of their work for years through other colleagues who had been involved with APSV. Since joining APSV, it’s been fantastic to learn even more of the community outreach and support programs that APSV offers and how it is positively helping our community deal with a wide scope of health issues.

Excited by the work of APSV?
If so, please consider joining our board. For more information, call 802-254-8263.

Maria joins us in Bennington!

Maria Donza brings years of experience working with agencies and resources in the Bennington community to her new role as Direct Services Associate. We are pleased to have her on our Bennington team.

Brattleboro welcomes Eben!

Eben Hilpert recently relocated to our area. He has vast experience connecting HIV+ individuals to community resources while working at Action Wellness in Philadelphia. We are thrilled to have him join the Brattleboro staff as Direct Services Associate.
Looking for Volunteers

by Diane Parton, Volunteer Coordinator

APSV volunteers get the work flowing and spirits high! We are looking to add a few more helpers to the roster.

At the AIDS Project we count among our supporters a pool of wonderful volunteers that offer their time and camaraderie to facilitate our work. Volunteers pitch in individually or in lively group gatherings to help out when hands are most needed. There is no need for on-going commitment, most of our volunteer work is event based, so emails go out to the group as needed.

If you are interested in donating your time, join the fun, we’d love to have you!
Contact Diane at apsvadm@sover.net or give us a call at (802) 254-4444.

AIDS Project of Southern Vermont

World AIDS Day

World AIDS Day takes place on December 1 each year. It’s an opportunity for people worldwide to unite in the fight against HIV, to show support for people living with HIV, and to commemorate those who have died from an AIDS-related illness. World AIDS Day is important because it reminds the public and government that HIV has not gone away – there is still a vital need to raise money, increase awareness, fight prejudice and improve education.

AIDS Project of Southern Vermont

World AIDS Day Commemoration

Friday, November 30 — 12:00 to 1:00 pm
Centre Congregational Church, Brattleboro


A Fond Farewell to Steve and Kevin

Speaking for all the members of the Board of Directors and staff of the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont, we express our deep respect for Steve Breakstone and Kevin O’Connor and what they have contributed to the Project and the community at large. They proactively took on the food programs in Bennington and Brattleboro, seeking out new and varied items and working directly with clients to accommodate individual needs. They formed lasting friendships with both clients and community partners such as the Vermont Foodbank and local churches. They worked diligently to support the Project’s annual Walk and various other events. We will truly miss both Steve and Kevin and wish them well.
INSIDE:

UPCOMING EVENTS

November 30 | World AIDS Day Remembrance Ceremony
Noon | Centre Congregational Church, 193 Main Street, Brattleboro

December 1 | Holiday Drag Show with the Ladies of the Rainbow
A benefit for APSV | VFW, 40 Black Mountain Road, Brattleboro

Prevention Program Services
• HIV and Hepatitis C testing
• Safer sex supplies
• Syringe services
• Health and addiction treatment referrals
• CLEAR: one-on-one health promotion interventions for people at high risk of HIV infection
• Educational presentations to groups and agencies in Windham and Bennington counties

For more information: Call Sue Conley at 254-4444 x113 or email prevent@sover.net

All services of the AIDS Project are free and confidential. We are dedicated to improving the quality of life for people living with HIV and reducing the number of new infections in southern Vermont.