The Stories Continue

Walk for Life to honor longtime AIDS Project supporter Lynn Martin

This year’s 32nd annual AIDS Project of Southern Vermont Walk for Life, scheduled for May 18 at 10 a.m. at downtown Brattleboro’s River Garden, will recognize longtime supporter Lynn Martin.

A poet, painter, mother and grandmother, the 83-year-old West Brattleboro retiree has served as a Project volunteer turned staffer turned volunteer again. But better to let her tell it. Here, in her own words, is Lynn’s story:

It was 1991. I was 56 and I needed a job. I had a 30-plus year gap in my resume, and I knew it wasn’t going to be easy in a recession to find one.

When I walked into the Vermont Department of Employment and Training, it was just by chance. I had a bachelor of arts in education and a master’s in creative writing. What kind of training could they give me?

Technically, they told me, I was a displaced housewife and entitled to help. The government, they said, would pay me minimum wage, $4.25 an hour for 40 hours a week, for six months. A poverty miracle.

“And do you have anywhere in mind?” the case worker asked.

I looked at her blankly. “Someone who will hire you,” she said kindly.

I took a breath and said in a whisper, “How about the Brattleboro Area AIDS Project?”

I knew the Project as a volunteer. And so that’s where they placed me. Right where I’d wanted to be all along without knowing it.

The Project was a few years old when I walked in holding Uncle Sam’s hand. It had leaped into being earlier to meet one client’s need. Volunteers had given hundreds and hundreds of working hours, their eyes on the cities, watching the epidemic come closer and closer and take on a rural face.

We appreciate Lynn Martin’s dedication to AIDS Project over the years. Pictured top left, Lynn reads the names with Mary Z; upper right she poses with outgoing board chair Patrick Brown at the 2018 Walk; and above, Lynn leads the Walk with then staff person Cindy Hutcherson.

They originally met in an open meeting once a month, deciding what was needed and setting out to find the resources necessary. If you turned up, you found yourself joyfully welcomed and set to work immediately.

Support groups were organized for one client, then two, then three. A support group was organized for parents and partners of someone HIV positive. A buddy system was created.

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May 18: 32nd Annual Walk for Life
10am | River Garden, Main Street, Brattleboro

Photos from APSV archives
The Story Continues, continued from page 1

is now the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont. It has seen HIV go from a sure death sentence to a chronic illness. It has gained funding. It has lost funding. It has met the epidemic head on with prevention and direct service. It has saved Windham County and Vermont millions and millions of dollars. But most importantly, it has saved lives.

It is hard to prove something that doesn’t happen, but I know there are fewer people diagnosed with HIV because of the work this amazing group of people has done and continues to do.

They are still there. The stories continue. Your help is still needed. Why don’t you call today and ask how you can help?
Thinking Out Loud

Longtime AIDS Project supporter Lynn Martin first penned this essay for our spring 2003 newsletter, not knowing its words would resonate so many years later.

No one can survive childhood without being wounded. Everyone remembers at least one time when their parents rejected them, pushed them away…. That’s why, as adults, we all look for someone to become our parents again, and for someone to look after us in times of need. And we search for a person to live with who can provide the companionship we all desperately need.

The above quote is from the short story, “A Strange Tale Down by the River,” by the Japanese author Banana Yoshimoto. When I read this, I understood why HIV prevention can be so difficult. As HIV prevention specialists, we struggle to find a way to encourage people to value themselves. We ask people to make healthy choices within those very areas where most people are most needy. Sexual behavior is about love. Drug use is often a way to mask the pain of living.

It is why I think syringe exchange as HIV prevention is front line prevention. The tools provided at a syringe exchange (sterile syringes, antibiotic cream, alcohol wipes, cookers, cotton) allow the participants to protect themselves from HIV and Hepatitis C. Harm Reduction, with its non-judgmental, participant-directed services, provides an environment where trust can be established, and a listening ear “in times of need” is available. It is a place where a welcome does not depend upon having fulfilled anyone else’s expectations.

It has been my experience, in the one year plus that we’ve been open in this very rural setting, that when people first come through the door their purpose is to obtain sterile syringes. When we’ve seen them two or three times, they shyly express how grateful they are this service exists. This acknowledgement seem to open the door to a prevention dialogue, and to requests for referral information to medical, psychological, and social services. This is when they are willing to consider HIV testing and ask for information on drug treatment options.

One constant is what I call “Uneasy Visibility.” It takes enormous courage for someone to walk into a syringe exchange. Because they are instantly “visible.” I can’t think of any other health service that requires someone to risk arrest in order to get services. In the time we have been open, no one, to my knowledge, has actually been arrested. (Thanks to extensive outreach to law enforcement agencies). This has reassured some people, but it’s the “what might happen” (and we all recognize that kind of apprehension) that keeps many away. All we can do is be there every week, offer alternatives, and be there when they decide to make some healthier choices in their lives.

Want to learn more?
For more information about our syringe services and other prevention programming, please call Sue at 802-254-4444 x 113.
2018 ANNUAL REPORT enclosed!

Outgoing board chair, Patrick Brown leads the 2018 Walk with a young supporter. More photos inside.

UPCOMING EVENT

32nd Annual AIDS Walk for Life
Join us on May 18 in Brattleboro.

This year’s Walk is dedicated to Lynn Martin for providing us with 30 years of unwavering support and commitment to individuals living with HIV/AIDS and those at highest risk for contracting the virus in southern Vermont.

Lynn Martin and other supporters at our 2018 Walk.