

PEI Lags Behind in AIDS Awareness

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On a dull morning this past week, I stepped tentatively into the AIDS PEI offices on St. Peters Road. I wasn't sure if I would be greeted by a clinical setting or the typical "activist" office strewn with literature and posters shouting angry slogans. I found neither of these. I was greeted instead by a friendly, homey setting, and equally warm and friendly people. George Clark-Dunning approached, and as if sensing my unease, opened with a joking comment, a wide smile and a firm shake of the hand. He introduced me to the center's director Barb Gibson, and then to Troy Perrot who, along with George, agreed to spend some time filling me in on the AIDS situation here in PEI.

My first question was intended to be serious, as I asked George how his life would be different as a PHA (Person Having AIDS) in a bigger place. With a smile and an offhand chuckle, he responded "Well... I'd have a date". While this may seem insignificant compared to some of the issues facing PHA's, it is indicative of a much larger issue facing Islanders suffering from AIDS; there is an aura of ignorance that persists here surrounding the disease in general and in particular, its transmission. Mr. Perrot commented that "when I tested positive in 1993 and I started doing some personal stories [in workshops] one of the first slides in my presentation was an ostrich with its head in the sand. That slide is still very valid today." There is still a pervasive fear among some Islanders that they might be infected

through basic interaction with an HIV positive person. Further to this, according to Clark-Dunning, even the gay community here doesn't welcome its HIV positive members, treating them as "damaged goods".

George took me back to 1986, when he first contracted the disease.

of the gay community, frequently chastising people for labeling her an 'innocent victim' since, the comment by its nature points the finger of blame.

The reality is that assessing blame is a pointless exercise. In order for the situation to change, we must face the hard facts. There are an estimated

exception, students seeking testing are able to access the service through the Health Centre at UPEI. Non students often feel that their only option is to go to New Brunswick or Nova Scotia for walk in, confidential testing and those testing positive elsewhere are not likely to come back to the Island announcing their status. While this may pose problems for the medical system here, it causes major problems in terms of funding for AIDS PEI. Essentially, the group is providing support for quite a number of PHA's without being funded for the service, because the reported numbers are so low. Although underfunded, the organization persists, doing its best to educate and promote awareness and healthy practices, through presentations to community groups and schools, and through the only needle exchange program for IV drug users on the Island.

While the group points out that it is important for the issue to be at the forefront throughout the year, they will be marking AIDS Awareness Week beginning November 28th and will cap it off with a breakfast intended to raise AIDS awareness on International Aids Day, December 1st. The group is also currently selling tickets in their annual "12 days of Christmas" campaign with a chance to win valuable prizes on each of the 12 days immediately preceding Christmas. Tickets are available at various other locations throughout the community as well as the AIDS PEI offices at 10 St. Peters Road. The office is open Monday to Friday for ticket sales and further information.

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- Troy Perrot, AIDS PEI

He's had ups and downs, but by his account he's been lucky and his health has been remarkably good. In almost 20 years, he's spent only 24 AIDS related hours in hospital. He's obviously fared better than many, as he described a point a number of years ago when he lived in Toronto and was "attending four funerals a week" At the time, he says, "we [gay men] were blamed for spreading this disease". Together, George and Troy then related a story of working with Janet Connors, who contracted HIV from her husband Randy, a hemophiliac who had been infected through tainted blood. They painted a picture of Connors as a woman who could very well have been angry about her infection, but she instead stood as an adamant supporter

400 cases of people living with HIV/AIDS here in PEI but there are only 44 confirmed diagnoses. Of the 400, 30% do not know that they are carrying the virus and potentially spreading it to others. What's more, the demographics tell a frightening story for students and youth. According to AIDS PEI, 25% of all new diagnoses in Canada last year were in women in the 15-24 age groups. The reasons for the low diagnosis rate are many, but primary among them is the fact that PEI's non-nominal testing service is remarkably difficult to access and, according to Perrot, is not always as confidential as it should be. For most Islanders to access testing services they must go to their family physician (or an after hours clinic) and be referred for a test. As an

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