Alice’s Wonderland

Tulsa’s Rainbow Village shines under Alice Wilder Bates

October 1, 1994 By Jana Eisenberg

One day in the late ’70s in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Alice Wilder Bates’ youngest son, David, came into her bedroom. Their conversation led his mother to ask him if he was gay. “I think so,” he said. Flattered by his trust, she knew that being gay would not change the way she felt about him.

David Wilder died of AIDS in 1991, at 29. During the last months of his life, Bates witnessed the devastation of the disease. Rather than fear or hate, she responded again with love. But her love is not evidenced by the righteousness of the bereaved nor the piousness of the guilty. Hardly, Alice Wilder Bates celebrates life.

After her experience with David’s illness, Bates’ instincts led her to form several support groups for people with HIV and the people who love them.

“I approach people by saying: ’I have a son who died of AIDS. I work in that area and I was wondering if you’d like to help.’ Most people come back toward me with love,” Bates said.

She goes on. "Because my son had AIDS, I’m a much stronger person. And I suspect that I was closer to David than I ever will be with my other four children. He and I *took* time to be close. My other kids are busy with children of their own. Since my first husband died of leukemia, I can empathize about a lover who died. And I can talk about a son who died. That’s all I do is just talk a lot."

Tulsa happens to be the seat of Oral Roberts’ television ministry as well as his theme park and university. In this setting, Bates finds certain applications of modern religion perplexing. “Ministers who work with AIDS are not accepted in their own church,” she said. “I belong to a church called Community of Hope, which is for people who have been turned away. Religion is a terribly big obstacle sometimes.”

Bates believes everyone should be involved. “I could be anybody. I’m almost 70, I’m short and sloppy. But I get an inner glow from what I do. I can’t help all the people with AIDS in Africa and in New York City. But I can help the ones I know in Tulsa. If even just the people who have been touched by AIDS could do that, it would be helpful to the whole world.”

Rainbow Village is the most ambitious project in which she is involved. Its goal is to create housing. When completed, it will provide food and basic services to families and individuals with AIDS. “This is a concept for outreach and love. We don’t want it to be a place to die but a place to live.”

But what is it about AIDS that most upsets her? “What’s so sad about this pandemic is that we as a society seem unable to understand AIDS is not a gay disease,” she said. “It’s unbelievable the way AIDS is spreading. And we jolly well better get with it because it’ll be your brother, sister, mother, father, you or me.”

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