Greetings from Ptown

Cape Cod’s AIDS services group marks 30 years.

June 25, 2013 By Trent Straube

Tim McCarthy was living in Virginia when he was diagnosed with HIV in 1988. Five years later, anticipating his death, he decided to move. “I wanted to die at a place where I as a gay man would be valued,” he says. “And Provincetown was the place.” Like countless other gay men, he had a history of vacationing at the storied town on the tip of Massachusetts’s Cape Cod. “Twenty years ago, before the [HIV] drugs and before the world cared about people with AIDS, Provincetown was this oasis in the desert of humanity.”

McCarthy, who is a gay video historian—his footage appears in How to Survive a Plague—joined up with what is now called the AIDS Support Group of Cape Cod (ASGCC). “They encouraged me to stay alive,” he says.

This year, ASGCC is marking three decades of service. It was founded by the town nurse, Alice Foley, “a tough and very proud lesbian who had the foresight to see this epidemic coming,” says Bill Furdon, who has worked at the group since 1989. Today, case managers like him provide “one-stop shopping” to over 400 clients on the cape and its islands, including Martha’s Vineyard, helping with food stamps, housing, insurance and other issues along with providing transportation (the nearest hospital is 50 miles away). “Many of our clients have issues of limited income, mental health and substance abuse, isolation, and housing instability as a result of seasonal changes,” Furdon says, adding that more women and people of color are enlisting services.

Ptown’s population is nearly 3,000, but it balloons to 60,000 on summer weekends. This presents challenges, Furdon notes, but it also gives ASGCC opportunities for creative HIV prevention and education, such as handing out condoms and performing theatrical shows on the beach—fun and welcoming flourishes that’ll keep drawing tourists, just like they did with McCarthy back in the 1980s.

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