Obituary - Belynda Dunn

June 1, 2002 By Jennifer Block

Belynda Dunn

Transplant Trailblazer
1951-2002

Belynda Dunn knew how to get your attention. When AIDS Action Committee of Boston hired her in 1992 to do church outreach, her first step was to take the preachers' wives on a harbor cruise. "This was a stroke of genius," said her former boss, Larry Kessler. "She took them out to sea, gave them a nice meal and dropped the anchor -- they had nowhere to go!" Within a few years, she had 45 black churches doing prevention education. "Belynda really lit a fire under me," her pastor, Rev. Martin McLee, told *The Boston Globe*. "She helped us cross ideological and theological lines and not get hung up on the homosexual issue. She said to the black church: 'Get over it.'"

Last summer, Dunn, who was coinfected with HIV and hepatitis C, found out that she needed a liver transplant -- and that her insurance company, Harvard Pilgrim's Neighborhood Health Plan, wouldn't pay for it. They deemed the procedure "experimental" because she was "terminally ill" with HIV, even though data show that liver transplants are no more risky for HIVers than for others. So she filed a lawsuit -- and got the attention of Boston's mayor, Thomas Menino, who raised private funds for her transplant and strong-armed the HMO into writing a check as well. "If I don't make it, it's OK," she told reporters in July. "Put the ball up and keep running with it."

Dunn didn't make it. After 12 hours of surgery at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, her body rejected the new organ. Surgeons managed to transplant another within days, but her body was exhausted by the surgeries. On March 12, she died of multiple organ failure, unrelated to HIV. Ironically, her liver was the last to go.

In Boston and elsewhere, her legacy lives on. "She got the Medicaid rules changed. She pushed insurance companies to look at their policies," said Kessler, who compared her charisma to that of Rosa Parks. "She didn't want people to be denied a transplant just because they're HIV positive." Dunn is survived by two children, Hope Brown and Nathanial "Chucky" Jolley; four grandchildren, Michael, Jamal, Quanisa and Nat; and many comrades in the AIDS movement to which she devoted her life.

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