When Push Comes To Drag

A Rural ASO Gets Footloose for Funds

June 1, 2005 By Suzy Martin

Rural areas suffered the brunt of private and federal AIDS cutbacks after 9/11—but Susan MacNeil's town, steeped in AIDS stigma, hardly cared. The ASO she directs in Keene, New Hampshire—AIDS Services for the Monadnock Region—lost nearly a third of its funding by 2003. So MacNeil proposed an HIVer boarding house in nearby Gilsum—and locals immediately banned boarding houses.

Without money or support, MacNeil went searching for glass slippers—size 13. "Some locals thought the sky would fall when I brought in drag queens," she says. Instead the Ladies of the Rainbow Lounge and their pumps brought the house down—one townsman even leaped onstage. The fourth performance, on March 19, sold out all 127 seats, raising $2,500.

In MacNeil's April 8fundraiser, Living Beyond the Lab Results, five positive women recounted their life stories. The director, Jo Schneiderman, says it shows "how these women live their lives in [areas] where people think there's no AIDS." On June 25, look for the "Karaoke Idol" competition—and community cheer even Simon Cowell couldn't sour.

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