Buddies Are Back!

GMHC relaunches its historic support program—with unexpected twists.

August 11, 2015 By Trent Straube

A GMHC client and volunteer from the original Buddy Program, circa 1990.

Long-term survivors have spoken, and Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) has listened. What the New York City–based AIDS organization learned was that many of its long-term clients feel isolated and forgotten as they struggle with depression, addiction, stigma and stress. To meet those challenges, GMHC decided to relaunch its iconic Buddy Program.

Started in 1982, the original program trained volunteers to act as "buddies" for people with AIDS, helping them get to doctors, clean their homes and run errands, or just offering friendship. Funding dried up in 2005, as did a large chunk of the need, thanks to modern meds that revitalized many folks who faced disabilities.

Jeff Rindler, GMHC's chief program officer, used to train buddies back in the day, and he's overseeing the reboot. In 2015, he says, the needs of people with HIV are more varied, so the new buddy model is much more flexible. "Although we started the new program with long-term survivors in mind," Rindler says, "it's available to everyone, even those diagnosed last week. And we welcome all volunteers." What's more, he envisions HIV-positive clients participating as mentors to buddies. Long-term survivors can pass along their experiences, for example, while younger people can share the struggles they face today.

"Back in 1985," Rindler recalls, "the need was for concrete help—like doing housekeeping—but today it could be going to the movies or a café. For someone isolated and feeling forgotten, just leaving the house improves mental health and overall well-being. That may lead to the client coming to our meals program or work force program—or they themselves might volunteer as a buddy. Little steps can lead to miracles."

To read about author Tom Glenn's book based on his experiences as a buddy program volunteer, click here.

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