A Road Less Traveled

Texas fundraisers help people with AIDS get home for the holidays.

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Clockwise from left: Patti Le Plae Safe; an installation of One Way Home; and Mac, who traveled to visit family

It started in 1990 as a Texas charity event to raise money to send a man with AIDS home for his final Christmas. Sadly, he died before the trip. But enough funds existed to help five other people make that journey. Since then, Home for the Holidays Texas Inc. has continued with its unique goal of providing travel assistance to Texans with AIDS.

“When we give them that ticket, it’s the greatest thing,” says Rodd Gray, the group’s founder and president. “It’s giving them the gift of going home. That closure they get to have—to say goodbye or to be hugged by someone who never admitted in the past that they loved them—it’s important and healing.”

Headquartered in Dallas, the group once sent a family—an HIV-positive grandmother and the grandchildren she cared for—on a one-way trip back to Ohio. “Another client,” Gray recalls, “had to go to Nairobi and didn’t have a passport or practically any ID. She was also on dialysis, and she had dementia. We had to get her back to her country because it was against her religion to cremate her and send the remains.” Sound impossible? Not for Team Gray. “The consulate and airlines helped me, and it all worked out beautifully.”

Home for the Holidays collaborates with caseworkers at Texas AIDS agencies who forward applications to the charity. Nowadays, as people with the virus are living longer and healthier, the scope of its travel assistance has broadened. Some people prefer to skip all the hullabaloo of Christmas and decide to travel another time—Mother’s Day is a popular choice—or they need to get home because of a family emergency. Other clients, Gray says, are depressed and simply need to get away from their current environment. The group has also paid for family members or friends to come visit people living with AIDS.

All this requires a ton of fundraising, mostly done through drag shows (Gray performs as Patti Le Plae Safe). “It’s a perfect balance of mixing activism and art,” says new media artist Liss LaFleur. One Way Home, her documentary and installation project about Gray and the charity, is slated for film festivals in 2015. But first, it’ll travel home for the holidays to debut on World AIDS Day in Dallas.

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