Respect and Love for Life

Since 1987, Maitri Compassionate Care has provided HIV/AIDS hospice and residential care in the heart of San Francisco's Castro District. [VIDEO]

March 15, 2018 By Casey Halter

If you're ever in San Francisco, keep an eye out for a big yellow corner house in the heart of the Castro District. That's Maitri Compassionate Care, an HIV/AIDS hospice and residence that has served as a safe, loving resting place since 1987.

The facility was founded by Issan (born Tommy) Dorsey, a drag queen turned Zen master who began running the organization out of his place after taking in a homeless student living with HIV. Dorsey died of AIDS-related lymphoma in 1990 –– but his legacy lives on in the heart of Maitri, a Sanskrit word that means "compassionate friendship."

Over the past 28 years, the organization has served as a final resting place for more than 1,600 people who lived with AIDS. The facility provides nursing and attendant care, accomodations, food and nutrition, social work case management and enrichment activities for its residents ––as well as volunteer programs across San Francisco.

Anne Gimbel is the organization's new executive director (and the first female). Previously, she was the regional director of the Alzheimer's Association of Coachella Valley. She is a licensed marriage and family therapist with nearly two decades of nonprofit management experience. Here, she details what makes Maitri such an integral part of the community.

Anne GimbelCourtesy of Maitri Compassionate Care

Tell us about Maitri.

We are 31 years old, and we own a large house with 15 beds. Everyone here in the house is living with HIV or AIDS—except for one room, which is designated in our charter by our founder. We get referrals from all kinds of hospitals and other agencies across the city.

Our specialty is care. Some people come in and have already chosen to be on hospice, others have not. Some people have a little bit of time left in their lives, others have more time. Most recently,

because of increases in homelessness across the country, we have some folks that have been homeless.

We pride ourselves on 24/7 care –– not just health, but mental health, food and quality of life. Doctors come in once a week, and people also go out for treatment. We supply transportation with vouchers for people to go to all sorts of different treatments, whether it's a cancer treatment or kidney dialysis or something else. We try to offer all kinds of treatment to all our residents.

How do you and your staff work to achieve your mission to provide "care that is dignified, nonjudgmental and unconditional"?

Maitri is a very special place. The care and passion that is given to everyone –– whether it's imminent end of life or maybe a few years away from end of life –– I think that's important. I've worked a lot with people living with the virus, and I have good friends who are HIV positive.

Our folks are dying from diseases like cancer and kidney problems. And as much as many say this isn't happening, it is––even with younger folks. The statistics are there; we see them in our communities.

We recently had someone who, for many years, did not know that he was HIV positive. Once he knew, it was too late for some of the medications that work so well with others. And then, he contracted cancer. We have a lot of dementia and other things that affect the mind.

Most of our folks have also experienced some sort of trauma in their lives. It varies across the spectrum. Many of them don't have family, so we become family. We want to make sure they have that dignity and that kind of special care while they're here.

Our director of food services has been here almost 20 years. She takes care of everyone's special diet and what they might need. These diets aren't pointed out when everyone sits in the dining room, but we all have dinner together. If people aren't feeling well, they aren't forced to come out of their rooms. On Wednesday night, if you came by, we'd be playing Bingo after dinner.

People have told me that it feels so rewarding to be in a place where they have this kind of family because they haven't had this in years.

What makes working at Maitri different?

The hands-on work with the residents. Getting to know them and talk to them and understanding what they need and want. For example, one of the fellows here wears the best furry, navy bathrobe every day. He loves to come over to the administrative side and get a kiss from all of us. I love it.

It's different from other places where you may just know a name of a donor or a person in the group. When we have a birthday, we make sure there's always a cake at lunch. So it's home. And I think that's important for everyone. Whether you're male or female or gay or straight or anything

else, it’s important. Nobody is rejected for being anything they want to be.

Everybody knows Maitri in the big yellow building. We’re on a very prominent corner, and I think that’s also comforting. To make a decision to move here — it’s a big decision. Sometimes, we have people who are afraid to come through the front door, but once they do it’s home.

How can the community help Maitri?

By volunteering and donating. All the information they need is on our website, MaitriSF.org. We have a list of things we like donated as items.

For example, medical equipment is very expensive, and medical supplies are very expensive. We are currently looking to get a new blood pressure machine. We also have service-specific donations — for example, some people like to donate money just for food.

We are also having our big annual event, Bliss, which is coming up May 6, where we’re going to try to raise money for next year. We’re grateful for the small donors, and we’re grateful for the larger donors. We’re also looking for people who have foundations that want to give.

What have been some of your favorite moments at Maitri so far?

This year’s holiday party. You should have seen the glow on everyone’s faces when the Gay Men’s Chorus came in at Christmastime. Everyone gathered around, helping them decorate the tree. Whenever we can, we bring in a musical number or we bring in someone as a treat for them. Everybody loves it and appreciates it.

I also have loved getting to know one of our patients who’s been here three times. She has health issues, and it’s tough for her, but she’s resilient and an absolute delight. Every time she comes here, she gets a little bit better. And every time she comes back to live with us she says, “Oh, I’m home. This feels like home.”

I think anyone who visits us is so pleasantly surprised that we’re so calm and we enjoy having fun and laughing, and eating foods, and celebrating people’s birthdays, and all those kinds of things. It’s a vital service to the community.

Bliss 2018 will take place Sunday, May 6. Maitri will be honoring former executive director Bill Musick for 20 years of leadership and service. Kirsten Havrehed will also be honored for her 20 years as a volunteer and donor.

Auctioneer and host Dale Johannes will be joined by comedian Jason Stuart, guitarist and vocalist Jonny Zywiciel, vocalist Frenchie Davis and Grammy- and Tony-winning vocalist and original Dreamgirl Jennifer Holliday.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/respect-love-life