Curtains Up

September 1, 2009 By James Wortman

In 2002, longtime AIDS educator Dan Gallagher helped organize an AIDS Memorial Quilt display at St. John's Episcopal Church in Yonkers, New York. Only 60 people showed up.

Disappointed by the poor turnout, Gallagher concluded that if people in his community were unwilling to go out and see the quilt, then he would bring that historic piece of AIDS history to them. He wrote *Between the Seams*, a play aimed at reducing HIV stigma among teenagers using the quilt as a backdrop. Performed in Yonkers just one year later, with financial support from Westchester-based AIDS-Related Community Services (ARCS), the show has since been seen by more than 15,000 young people.

"Basically, [the show] puts a face on something that young people can't put a finger on," says Gallagher, 60, who is HIV negative. "They hear about AIDS from what's taught in schools, but we don't see it as much in the news as we used to."

For Gallagher, the decision whether to tackle the subject wasn't difficult.

"I have a sister who's positive, and I've had several friends pass away [from AIDS-related illness]," he explains. "So it became a crusade for a while." He pauses. "Actually, it still is."

Gallagher has dedicated the past 14 years of his life to HIV counseling, testing and education with ARCS and Westchester Medical Center. Writing a play based on his own experiences was an extension of that work. For the show, he created eight distinct HIV-positive characters from a variety of backgrounds to show that HIV does not affect any one gender, ethnic group or sexual orientation.

"There's no fourth wall, so they're talking directly to the kids," Gallagher says of the actors. "It all has a mesmerizing, almost magnetic effect on many of the audiences—if not most of the audiences—that we have been involved with."

The show has been so successful that Gallagher and the nonprofit AIDS Theater Project New York have been invited to bring *Between the Seams* to Ghana this fall. Gallagher is also willing to share the show with any group that wants to perform the play in its own community, free of charge.

"We'll send the script to anybody that's interested," he says. "We only want to know where they're doing it and when they'll perform it. We just want the education to be out there."

For more info on Between the Seams*, visit btsonstage.com.*

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