From the Dark Days of AIDS Arrives an Unexpected Gift

How a young man who died in 1995 helps HIV-positive students attend college today

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Days were dark. Nights, sometimes unbearable. Who would be gone tomorrow? Who would be diagnosed next?

Looking back, as strange as it sounds, it was an absolute honor to have lived those days when AIDS dominated news headlines and stole so many precious lives. An honor because I was able to be with so many people as they took their last breath, holding hands, stroking foreheads.

There was so much more, of course. Yes, it was dreadful. Haunting in some ways till this very day. And that's why many of us keep on with the fight to educate people about preventing HIV/AIDS.

We have lived the terrible, outrageous toll it can take. I was on the board of directors of the Sacramento AIDS Foundation back in the day—from 1990 through 1995. What a wonderful difference we made in the early days of that organization. A program called Hand-to-Hand matched a volunteer with a person living with AIDS.

The two walked the journey together. The initial devastating diagnosis, treatment options, and often, facing death head-on. The Hand-to-Hand match provided food deliveries, transportation, and emotional support. It was an inspirational component of a dire time in our history.

All these years later—maybe even from the heavens, you might say—that program continues to give. A man who was helped by Hand-to-Hand during his life and death is making a big difference this very day, for a community that was there for him, unconditionally, decades ago.

Though the young man died in 1995, his family will never forget how important it was for their son to have a "friend"—a Hand-to-Hand match. To have stigma-free support.

Recently, Capital City AIDS Fund (CCAF) was bequested money from the trust of this young man's parents, money earmarked to invest in people living with HIV/AIDS. In particular, the Helen Veress Mitchell Scholarship Fund that helps HIV-positive students attend college.

As a former board member of the Sacramento AIDS Foundation, I was tracked down by the trust attorney who discovered that I am still involved with an HIV/AIDS nonprofit organization—I serve

as president of CCAF. And grateful I am that he found me. My students will be guaranteed scholarships for years to come.

As I bookend this story, again, I remain honored. Honored to have held the hands of dying people—when sometimes no one even wanted to touch them. Honored to have had an opportunity to educate the public about the facts of how the virus is contracted. And honored to continue to be of service.

This is my passion. How very fortunate I am that during my lifetime I have found a way to perhaps move a grain of sand on a beach—or maybe a few. And to the man and family now helping CCAF invest in other HIV-positive people, the only phrase that rattles through my brain is: Thank you.

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