

An advocate for life offers hope to contemporary outcasts

By Teresa A. Parsons

Sitting in her cubicle-like office, Sister Alice Robeson, SSJ, could still pass for a high-school health teacher.

Except that all the books on her shelves are about Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). And these days her 'students' are considerably more interested in the subject.

A sister is probably the last person clients expect to encounter on the staff of Aids Rochester, Inc., an agency that offers counseling, support and education to persons affected by AIDS.

But when they meet Sister Alice, it is not a female religious they see first, but rather a caring and informed woman with a message of love to those contemporary outcasts and their families who are perhaps most in need of it.

Equally as devastating as the HIV virus is to the body's immune system is the alienation and separation persons with AIDS suffer at the hands of the general public.

A person diagnosed with AIDS automatically becomes a minority, regardless of lifestyle. "When people shy away from you, when they don't want your kids in their schools, when they don't even want to shake your hand or even touch you, that's segregating enough. You don't need to belong to a so-called minority group," Sister Alice said.

Just as medical scientists are dedicated to finding a way to relieve the physical symptoms of AIDS, the staff at AIDS Rochester is dedicated to easing and healing their social and psychological pain.

Instead of a virus, the enemies of AIDS Rochester are fear and ignorance. "We as a culture don't tend to think of infectious disease as a killer," Sister Alice explained. "We expect medicine to be able to heal or prevent it... We're not in control of it, and that makes it newsworthy and also scary."

But much of the press attention devoted to the topic reinforces the "I'm bad, therefore I'm sick" concept, she said. "There is no guilt associated with a virus. One of the things I can say with some authority is that God does not punish you. He just doesn't act that way."

AIDS Rochester now sponsors almost a dozen different support groups for persons with AIDS, persons with AIDS-related complex (ARC is a set of illnesses or infections that do not fit into the Center for Disease Control's definition of AIDS, but which are similar), carriers of the AIDS virus who are otherwise unaffected, families of persons with AIDS and others.

Sister Alice's title at AIDS Rochester is health education coordinator, which means she offers presentations on AIDS to all kinds of people — health-care workers and migrant workers, college students and schoolteachers.

Among the messages she tries to convey is that AIDS is spread by high-risk behaviors, not groups. It is not confined to the gay community or drug abusers or prostitutes. An AIDS Rochester brochure states that "Anyone who has not been in a mutually monogamous relationship since 1977 or who has shared intravenous drug needles since 1977 may be at risk for AIDS."

At the same time, Sister Alice and other health educators keep "hammering away at the fact that of more than 23,000 cases diagnosed so far, no one has caught AIDS from casual contact."

Casual contact does not mean passing someone on the street, she explained. "It means living in the same house, sharing the same dishes."

Her presentations range from 45 minutes to an hour. "In that amount of time, we cannot expect to change deeply held beliefs, but we can give accurate information and respond to the fear behind the questions," she said.

Sister Alice doesn't announce to those gatherings that she is a sister. "Many of the questions center around sexuality. To ask a sister about particular sexual behaviors and about how the diseases is transmitted is more than they are willing to do," she said.

She was hired as a qualified individual, not as a religious, according to Jackie Nudd, AIDS Rochester executive director. "She's the most dynamic, loving and caring person I've ever met," Nudd said. "The discussion came up as to whether her being a sister would be negative input in her ability to relate with clients. We studied that question for about 30 seconds. We never measured anybody else by any but the standards required to do the job."

Like all the members of AIDS Rochester's small staff, Sister Alice does a little bit of everything the agency does — from informal counseling to running off copies of informational sheets.

"In terms of offering support, concern and a willing ear, we all do that," she explained.

Once she gets to know clients, she tells them who she is. "Many are surprised and happy that a sister is doing this kind of work," she said. "But some also say they're glad I waited to tell them."

Because she is not on staff as a sister or spiritual director, Sister Alice said she would never initiate a conversation about faith in her work setting.



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal
A former high-school health teacher, Sister Alice Robeson, SSJ, now works as a health-education coordinator for AIDS Rochester, Inc. The agency offers support, counseling and information for persons affected by AIDS, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

"But when other people bring it up, I am able to offer them hope by showing them the reality that they are loved, that there are people here in this office who care and that there is a God who loves them," she said. "As a sister, I have been able to carry that message to people."

Her religious vocation is particularly helpful in dealing with the families of persons with AIDS. "Sometimes they find they can articu-

late that dimension of their struggle more freely when they are with someone who shares their faith experience," she said.

Sister Alice came to AIDS Rochester in July, fresh from the University of Michigan, where she earned a master's degree in public health. She turned to community health education after teaching health for nearly 15 years at Nazareth Academy and the former St. Agnes High School.

Her goal was to work with people who could not afford to pay for good health care and education, and who would not normally have advocates in the health-care system.

"One dimension of coming to reverse life is through enhancing the quality of life," she explained.

AIDS was not yet of real local concern when Sister Alice left Rochester for Michigan in 1984. But influenced by several of her teachers, she became involved with an AIDS support network in Michigan.

After graduation, she returned with vague notions of working at a community health center like Corpus Christi's and of continuing her AIDS-related work as a volunteer.

"I wasn't familiar with the fact that AIDS Rochester had become as highly structured as it has, or even that it had full-time paid positions," she said.

Then she learned that the agency was seeking a health education coordinator. "In many ways, I see these people as the lepers of our time. Given that reality, I was committed to working for this agency," she said.

There were still concerns to resolve — namely whether her ministry would be acceptable to her congregation and to the diocese. "It (ministry to persons with AIDS) can be controversial, given the sensitivity of being aware of Church teaching and also the reality of individual choices," she said.

Not only did the Sisters of St. Joseph offer their approval — many were enthusiastic. Likewise, Sister Alice has received a letter of support from the diocesan vicar for religious, Sister Muriel Curran, SSND.

"I have not received a lot of negative feedback," she said. "I think most people recognize that persons with AIDS have many needs, not the least of which is healing, and I think they recognize that this is a place where priests and sisters should be in the forefront."

So far, that has not been the case in most local churches. "Many individuals within Church structures have responded generously to the needs of persons in their congregations with AIDS," Sister Alice said. "But there is a real need for clergy to become better educated and more sensitive to the needs of persons with AIDS. There will be persons in their congregations with AIDS. We will all know some individual affected by it, and we'll all be challenged to respond to them."

"The main thing people can do is to take responsibility for challenging what they see and read about AIDS in the media — to have individuals willing to keep current on what's happening and spread that to others," she added.

AIDS developments festival

As a health educator, Sister Alice Robeson said one of her most important and most difficult tasks is keeping up with medical and scientific developments on the disease.

For instance, the virus which causes AIDS is no longer known as HTLV-III. Delegates to an international conference last June agreed to abandon a bewildering variety of different labels for the virus, including HTLV-III, in favor of a single new term, Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).

The spread of that virus is equally difficult to track. As of last week, about 70 people in the Rochester area were known to AIDS victims, according to Sister Alice. However, many more persons are estimated to have been infected with the HIV virus in the United States.

There are hopeful developments as well. Last week, federal health officials announced that an experimental drug,

AZT, an antiproliferative, has significantly slowed the growth of the HIV virus. Although officials consider the drug neither a cure nor a breakthrough and have not determined its long-term effects, the drug may soon become available to a larger number of persons with AIDS.

The only means by which the virus can be transmitted is blood-to-blood contact, either through sexual intercourse or the sharing of intravenous needles.

A screening test for blood and blood products has greatly reduced the risk of contracting the virus through blood transfusions. Transfusions remain infected through contaminated blood to transfused blood recipients.

In California and Michigan, the public has a choice of testing for HIV. They, however, are protesting that government testing for HIV virus.

K of C brings cable network to Greater Rochester area

Greater Rochester's Knights of Columbus are coordinating efforts to bring the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) to the Greater Rochester area. Each Monday evening at 5:30-6:30 p.m., EWTN can be received on Channel 16 in the city and Channel 2 in the suburbs.

Greater Rochester Cablevision will conduct a survey on the success of the test preview in late September and early October.

Efforts to bring EWTN to the Rochester area are being made by Bill Schmitz, coordinator for the Greater Rochester Knights of Columbus.

EWTN offers six hours of family programming nightly from 7 p.m.-1 a.m. The Network's program guide includes weekly series on Catholic teachings, Bible study guides and wholesome family movies.

Bread for the World program scheduled for Southern Tier

A Bread for the World workshop is scheduled for Monday, September 29 from noon until 2 p.m. at the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry, 160 High St., Elmira. The workshop will focus on the systematic causes of hunger, both in the United States and in the world, and will offer analysis of public policy options that addresses the cause. Marlene Kiingati, New York state regional

organizer for Bread For the World, will lead the session.

The workshop is free and open to all concerned about hunger issues. Bring a bag lunch. Drinks will be provided.

Bread For the World is a Christian citizens' movement whose members seek government policies that address the basic causes of hunger at home and abroad.

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