

Family Unity Camping Weekend: Dreams Come True for HIV-Affected Families

Anyone who has spent time working with HIV-affected families has stories to tell about the families' courageous efforts to stay the course while confronting a stigmatized, life-threatening illness in one or more family members. While HIV disease is becoming a chronic disease as a result of medical breakthroughs, many families are still experiencing catastrophic loss due to HIV. These ongoing, multiple losses are difficult for families and providers alike. This narrative is about a family camping experience for HIV-affected families. This experience provided family members and the professionals working with them a renewed zest for the challenges of living with HIV and an impetus to seize the moment.

by
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The Experience

In 1986 when I first became involved with HIV/AIDS, little did I imagine that I would dedicate the majority of my career to this arena. Over a decade later, my clinical work, research, and teaching all center on the impact of HIV on families and our communities. The reality of having to say good-bye to so many who have left us prematurely is not easy; but working with parents to ensure that their children have a bright future is the most rewarding aspect of my career. This weekend underscored just how important it is to join with families confronting HIV/AIDS and revitalized my commitment to staying the course with families living with HIV/AIDS.

Only 72 hours prior, 56 family members and 28 staff members came together at the Double "H" Hole in the Woods Camp to participate in Family Unity, an opportunity for HIV-affected families to have a care-free weekend. For Labor Day weekend, we joined together to celebrate life and to explore the meaning of being a family liv-

ing with HIV/AIDS. All of us returned home with a deeper appreciation for the meaning of a caring community.

Family empowerment means that families know what is in their best interest and that professionals, by relinquishing the "expert" role, join with families to achieve family goals. From planning the weekend to cooking food to helping with the horses or cleaning up, the boundaries between family campers and staff blurred as we came together to form a community. Women living with HIV who either did not have children or whose children were grown helped plan the weekend and participated as staff. Syracuse University School of Social Work undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, along with alumni, joined with Double "H" staff to create a weekend of fun, relaxation, memories, and a chance to reflect on living with HIV. Horseback riding, swimming, boating, bonfires, arts and crafts were balanced with rap groups, the wish-boat ceremony, and a reflection service. Let me share a few of the more poignant moments.



Family Unity was "born" two years earlier when a member of our support group for HIV+ women questioned:

"Why can't families go camping? Don't get me wrong, I'm glad my kids are going next week, but, what we need is a break from this damned disease."

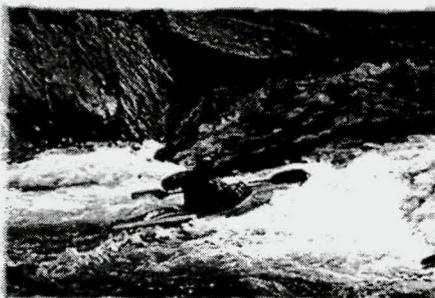
She was right. She along with the other parents needed a chance to simply enjoy their time with their children. Equally, I was energized by the chance to work with a fun project versus addressing the psychosocial complexities of HIV disease. Since 1990, we had explored the meaning of HIV in group members' lives. Planning camp was a new challenge on which to focus our energies.

We agreed to work together to make family camp a reality. The Double "H" Hole in the Woods Ranch, co-founded in 1992 by businessman Charles Wood and actor Paul Newman, immediately came to mind as the place to have the camp. Wood and Newman teamed up to deliver unique, fun-filled program services for children. Double "H" provides a camping experience for youngsters with life-threatening illnesses. Children have a chance to just be kids and to enjoy activities that are creative, adventurous, and fun, ranging from a ropes course to pottery to fishing to white water rafting. An onsite Elderhostel involves members over 55 to come and be with the kids.

During the previous summer, I volunteered as a so-

cial work consultant at Double "H" to provide psychosocial support to both the children living with HIV and the staff. The camp's commitment to offering fun and growth-producing experiences was a good match for our families' need to experience the same. From that experience, I knew that children thrived in the Double "H" camp setting and felt confident their families would too.

In fact, many of the children who attended the HIV session became part of our family-camping cohort. Max Yurenda,



the director, and his staff were supportive of the idea of developing a family camping experience and we began to plan. From the onset, parents were an integral part of the planning team. We worked to build a sense of community with all of us contributing to the success of the weekend. Affirming the positive aspects of living with HIV was an underlying premise of the weekend as shared in the *Family Camping Newsletter* by LaSharon Haskins, a local activist and member of the planning committee.

As a woman living with HIV, it never ceases to amaze me how very rich my life continues to be with opportunities for life-giv-

ing experiences. When I received that positive test result eight and a half years ago I thought, "Oh my God. I'm gonna die." Had I known then what I know now, I would have said, "I've been dead for all these years. Now it's time to live." I'm not saying by any means that I'm glad I've got HIV. I hate this virus and the way it is devastating our race, the human race. What I am saying is that for me HIV has proven to be the perfect opportunity to learn to love and to appreciate life. A day at a time I'm learning to reach within and find God, to reach out and touch somebody's hand and to look up and kiss the sky. Especially in the face of HIV, it is important that I know and believe that I am a wonderful, beautiful and lovable child of God and sister to each and every one of you. Where there is life, there is ALWAYS hope. Where there is hope, there is ALWAYS love. Where there is love, there is ALWAYS God. Love somebody. Start with you...

For more than a year we worked to develop Family Unity and raise the funds needed to pilot the family camping experience. The original weekend was delayed for one year due to insurance problems. Additionally, a number of funding sources, who previously supported services for children, were not interested in supporting a family camping experience. Many were afraid that they would not be healthy enough to come the year later, or worse yet, maybe they would

not be alive in a year. Many times the dream seemed to be slipping away. Finally, Family Unity became a reality Labor Day Weekend 1997.

Imagine moms, dads and children emerging from a coach after a long, tiresome five-hour trip across upstate New York on a holiday weekend. From that moment until Sunday when everyone clamored back on the bus, there was a sense of community. For once, family members could share their experience of living with HIV without worrying whether they would be judged by the person across from them. Family members and staff alike joined together to create positive memories.

Lucinda*, mother of 5, climbed aboard a horse for the trail ride, fulfilling a lifelong dream to ride a horse. She had so much fun that she went on another trail ride in the afternoon. As she urged her horse forward, she said with a laugh, "Who would have thought this Latina would be riding a horse?" The Martinez family built a wind chime together for their back porch. All family members helped with meals, the teens taking care of the Saturday evening barbecue.

As the afternoon sunlight filtered through the trees, we sat on the porch overlooking Lake Vanare making life masks, plaster of Paris impressions of each person's face. From our perch, we could see the Double "H" pine tree which is two trees grown together in the form of an H. Ironically, the two trees grew together before the camp was

founded. To anyone who knows Double "H", this tree is just part of the magic of Double "H". Today, one tree lives while its counterpart is dead. Double "H" stands for health and happiness which the joined trees embody. As folks were making life masks, we talked about the meaning of the trees. A grandmother shared, "That tree is like life, it's the mix of living while remembering those who have passed before us." We reminisced about Sandy, a founding member of our group.

Remember how Sandy insisted the group start in June and not wait until the fall? She said we didn't have time to wait until the fall. She's with us today, I can feel her.

While making the life masks, each person thought carefully about how to pose. Some smiled, others struck a more somber pose. One father closed his eyes creating a mask that appeared lifeless. His countenance was eerie, cold and death-like. I resisted my urge to coax him to lighten up; it was his mask, not mine. As I continued to build his mask, I asked him what it felt like to have his eyes totally covered. He described a sense of calm and being at peace. All five of the Jones family made masks. They compared their masks, noting how similar their noses were and how strong a nose they shared. They planned to put the masks all together in the family room, a memento of their time together as a family. As each mask was

peeled from the individual's face, a picture was taken of the mask beside the person's face, creating a vivid contrast of a living with a lifeless image.

Beth had come to camp with her 9-year-old daughter, Samantha, and her mother, Ann, who had flown in from the west coast. On the second day, Beth and Ann asked me to join them for a coffee and to talk. Based upon observing their interactions, I assumed they wanted to talk about how much fun they were having at camp. Both women had been highly involved in the camp activities since their arrival and were clearly enjoying themselves and the others. So I was taken by surprise when, in a halting voice, Ann shared:

We're glad we're here. I've learned so much from Beth. Before this trip, I thought I had to support her and as it turns out, she's teaching me how to live in the face of death. I was just diagnosed with end stage cancer.

Silence and tears followed for all three of us. Beth's guardianship plan to have Ann care for her daughter was called into question by Ann's cancer diagnosis. Both women wanted Samantha's future to be stable, yet the reality was that it was uncertain. As I collected myself, I asked them to share what Ann's diagnosis meant to them. In essence it meant that all life is fragile and none of us has a guarantee on the future. I felt pressure to make things okay, to

* All campers names were changed to protect individual's identities.

help find a solution. I resisted my urge to speak up immediately, to try to make it all right, because no one can make this situation all right. The painful reality is that Samantha will probably lose both her mother and her grandmother during her childhood. I felt powerless. As I reached for their hands I said "How painful." They nodded and both shared their sense of vulnerability and concern for Samantha's future. Beth asked me to look out for Samantha; I reassured her that I would.

In the evening, the boat ceremony embodied hope and healing. Throughout the day, natural materials were collected to make a boat; nothing artificial could be used. So, campers had to figure out how to build the boats without using string, nails or other manufactured materials. Once the boat was complete, builders wrote a wish or a fear on a piece of birch bark which was sent into the lake via the boat. After the sun set, the camp song was sung:

*Campers we adore you
Place in our hearts for you
How we love you*

The boats were launched from the peninsula. As the current carried them out into the lake, people hugged and watched the boats drift away. Van, 12 years old, was hanging back from the group, observing all that was happening. Two weeks earlier, during the session for children living with HIV, Van had been in the front with tears streaming down his face as he remembered his mother who

passed away last year. I had known his mother, so, as he cried, I rubbed his back and shared memories about her. Specifically, I shared her memories of Van as a child and how much she loved him. As his crying slowed, one of his favorite counselors invited him back into his group. This time as he stood in the background with his arms tightly wrapped around himself he looked fretful again. I approached him and asked what was up. Van said, "I'm standing here, checking it out so that I won't cry." I sensed he was remembering what had happened at the last campfire and was ready to comment on that intense experience. Instead, I decided to support his holding it together and encouraged him to rejoin us when he was ready. A few minutes later he snuggled next to his adoptive mother. Later he was surrounded by his second family, his sister, their adoptive family of five, and a foster brother. Van felt his Mom's presence and remembered her while surrounded by the love of his second family and everyone there.

Like the boats drifting into the depths of the lake, we found ourselves drifting toward the bonfire, talking about the meaning of the boats' journey to each of us. Slowly we began to sing, "This Little Light of Mine," "I'm Gonna Make It Shine," "Amazing Grace," and others. The youngest children nodded off in their parents' arms or were cuddled by members of the staff whom they hadn't known 24 hours earlier. As the fire began to fade, most of us headed to the

cabins. The teens stayed behind for cabin chat—a chance to talk about how HIV affects them or anything on their minds. Halt-ingly Lamar began to share

"I don't know where I belong any more...it's real hard. All year I lived with grandma in Rochester. On Wednesday she said she couldn't keep me any more and put me on the bus to Syracuse. Friday mom brings me here."

And this six foot-two, fifteen year old began to cry. The counselors and I were taken aback. Lamar suddenly was vulnerable, a striking contrast to the day before when he had intimidated staff based on his physical build and streetwise attitude. Now, he needed solace and comfort. Yet, he was right. He truly didn't belong anywhere and it would not help to falsely reassure him that he did. Instead I focused on what he does for himself and who has helped him get through the tough times of the past year.

Old familial conflicts bubbled to the surface as one divorced couple adjusted to being close together and having to share their son with each other. From the start I had difficulty dealing with the father. As the families got off the bus, the bus driver demanded to speak with me about his problems with Jack. Jack had missed the bus and chased it 60 miles on the Thruway to get on. The driver felt this was dangerous and wanted me to take care of it. Immediately Jack faulted me for not being clear with him about

the time of departure. I felt defensive as I struggled to listen. He also was physically intimidating and was using that intimidating presence purposefully in this situation.

Within an hour, a heated exchange broke out with his ex-wife, Ellen. I stayed at a distance, hoping they'd resolve their issues. As they yelled at each other, their son, Nick, tried to distract them as everyone else became visibly uncomfortable with the argument. I felt I had to intervene and was met with hostility again. Jack made it very clear that no woman director was going to tell him what to do. I felt threatened and tried to diffuse the situation. Neither parent was interested in listening to the other, or to me for that matter. So, mediation was out of the



question. We were at an impasse, and I encouraged them to center themselves on the purpose of the weekend, to give their son a family weekend. I debriefed the incident with my administrative staff and shared my concern that the family would not make it through the weekend. We explored the ways to handle it and agreed that future conflict had to be addressed quickly and clearly. We developed a plan that the executive director and I would meet with them jointly. I felt it was important to have a male co-facilitate this with me. We ended the debriefing with the hope that this plan would not be needed.

Less than two hours

later, another screaming match erupted in the dining room. When I asked them to leave the dining room and come meet with Max and me, they initially refused and continued fighting. I insisted that we had to meet or they had to leave. Jack accused me of forcing him to meet with us, while Ellen asked me to send Jack home, allowing her to stay with Nick. I refused her request and I reframed the situation by saying they had a choice to meet with us and agree to some ground rules or they would be choosing as a family to leave. Both accused me of ruining their weekend with their son. Max and I repeatedly put the choice back to them while stating that

we had to run the camp and ensure the experience was good for all the families. A moment of comic relief came when

Jack claimed that I had created all of their problems by delving into their business, and that they could get along very well without me interfering. Max picked up on this and said we were there to help them get along. We reviewed our administrative decision that the ongoing fights were not acceptable, and that all of the family would be asked to leave if the conflict continued. Jack and Ellen left our meeting, stating that we were unreasonable. We asked them to think it over. Shortly, they returned saying they were ready to give their son a special weekend. As we debriefed, we were unsure whether the weekend would work for them. Max and I made

a point of reaching out to both parents and talking to each of them at various activities, focusing on how Nick was enjoying himself. Fortunately, both parents were able to put a hold on their discord and gave Nick a memorable weekend. Watching Nick fall asleep in his father's arms, while his mother sat next to them rubbing his back as the campers were singing, created a visual image of the weekend's meaning by symbolizing the ability to work through conflict and connect in a meaningful way. The next morning, this family wrote the following about the weekend experience:

You gave us-

*Unity instead of isolation
Hope instead of desperation,
And above all love!*

On Sunday morning, some of us participated in a reflection service. As Zach's beautiful guitar melody filled the chapel, we were invited to share what the weekend meant. Near the end, Kathy rose and brought her three-year-old son, BJ, to the front to share:

"I found out my diagnosis when BJ was born. I'm here today because of him. I'm not yet the woman I want to be, but I've come a long way since then."

As she spoke, Alice, also living with HIV, stood behind her rubbing her back. As Kathy cried, Alice gently picked up BJ and hugged him while other parents hugged Kathy and her older daughter.

Twenty minutes before the bus was scheduled to depart for home, the fragility of life for everyone living with HIV/AIDS was underscored when a mom's heart rate became erratic and she appeared to be in congestive heart failure. Nyla hadn't had any of her cardiac medications since Friday afternoon when her prescription ran out. Medicaid doesn't allow patients to fill prescriptions in advance. From her perspective, the choice was go to camp without medications for the weekend or stay home from camp. As we sat in the infirmary, Paul's Body Shop, deliberating whether she needed to be sent to the hospital or was able to return to Rochester, the stark reality of living with HIV hit all of us again. Medically, she needed to go to the local hospital. The nurse practitioner was adamant that Nyla be taken to the hospital and initially refused to even consider Nyla's wishes. Emotionally, Nyla needed to take her four sons home to Rochester and get them settled in before attending to her medical needs; she said, "Sue, I need to go home, my boys need me, I'll be okay." Her choice was clear, the boys needed to go home. I felt torn between her medical and emotional needs and equally torn between Nyla and the nurse. Both had legitimate concerns. I chose to support Nyla's decision and worked with the nurse to explore her discomfort. Both of us worried about the fragility of Nyla's medical status, yet as mothers ourselves, her need to care for her boys resonated with us. Slowly, Nyla climbed onto

the bus and headed to the back seat to lie down. Nyla assured us all that she would be okay, an assurance that provided little comfort because we knew she couldn't control the congestive heart failure. While we were deliberating, her sons and some of the other parents had packed up all of her belongings. Bob, the driver, calmly said he would call 911 if Nyla became sicker on the return trip.

As the remaining families loaded the bus, I hugged a dad and said, "I hope you'll join us next year." To which he replied, "I hope I am here next year to be here at Double 'H'." It took me a second to grasp his meaning as we nodded to each other and hugged good-bye.

Later driving down the darkened Thruway with my daughter sleeping next to me, I anxiously awaited reaching the perimeter of Rochester where I could call Nyla on the cellular phone. As I started to press the send button, I hesitated, wondering who, if anyone, would



answer the phone. When Nyla answered, I realized that I was holding my breath. We were lucky this time.

Reflections

Of all the HIV/AIDS clinical work I have provided since 1986, this is the most meaningful. The words in this essay fail to adequately capture the spirit

of Family Unity Weekend but hopefully offer a window to the reality of living with HIV and the challenges and rewards for those of us who work with HIV-affected families. The intensity of the work is invigorating. Reflecting upon this description of Family Unity weekend, I am challenged to analyze why this moment of respite from the harsh reality of living with HIV was so meaningful professionally.

As a social work educator, I have committed myself to preparing both graduate and undergraduate students to provide quality services for those living with or affected by HIV. Despite my best efforts in the classroom, over the years many students candidly shared that while being very interested in HIV/AIDS, they were uncomfortable with the prospect of working with these individuals and families. The camping experience offered a chance for me to work with students from the planning phase to the camping experience to the evaluation. In other words, we could transform our discussions of providing strengths-oriented family-centered services into an experiential learning opportunity. I felt challenged to connect my students with the families, some of whom I had worked with since 1990. My hope was that the weekend would create a positive experience for all involved.

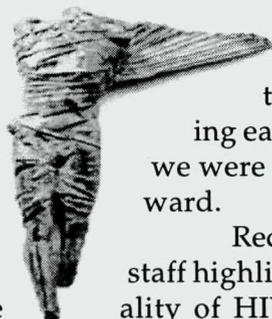
Two years ago, when an HIV mother and I discussed the possibility of a camping experience, I naively thought, *What a great idea, shouldn't be hard to do.*

In retrospect, I am glad I was such an optimist; it helped me stay the course through the various challenges those next two years brought us in making this dream a reality. Equally as a researcher, I had learned from families how we were not serving them well. I looked forward to spending the weekend and learning more about the families' concerns to better inform my work.

The difficulty of securing funding was harder than anticipated. As the student members of the Planning Committee sought funds, many HIV-supportive funding sources simply did not reply to our requests. Whereas funding a bus for kids to go to camp was appealing to funders, many balked at the idea—including parents. One source queried, "Why include parents? We like funding the kids, we're not interested in the parents." Understandably, the students were upset by the lack of positive response. Confronting colleagues' anti-parent bias is disquieting, but this created a rich learning opportunity for students. We explored how parents have been negatively portrayed as uncaring, unloving vectors of HIV disease who transmit the illness to their children. Since beginning this work in 1986, I have yet to meet a mother or father who willingly gave this disease to their beloved child. Parents need and deserve support as they cope with the realities of living with HIV.

The students had to problem solve how to present

parents positively to funders and found that sharing the stories of parents was an effective approach. While continuing to pursue the necessary funding, we examined how their experiences mirrored those of the families and developed strategies to address the persistent stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS in the community. The stigma of HIV affects social workers working in the field in a parallel process. Frequently, the worker is stigmatized too. Colleagues queried, "How could you do that work? I am too sensitive." As if HIV/AIDS social workers are not. By acknowledging this and supporting each other's efforts, we were able to move forward.



Recruiting volunteer staff highlighted another reality of HIV care—compassion fatigue. Many HIV frontline staffers were simply too tired to volunteer a holiday weekend. Initially, some said yes, only to drop out when the logistics became too demanding, resulting in increased demands for the core volunteer staff. The long hours in preparation, not to mention the weekend itself, gave each of the core team a moment's pause. Yet, they were satisfied by contributing to the success of the weekend. Collectively we were able to help the families and supported the front-line providers. As the population of infected and affected has grown, supporting staff confronted by the challenges of working with

people who have a life-threatening disease is becoming increasingly important. This experience is a first step. More needs to be done to renew frontline staff and enable them to continue to provide quality services.

Equally, efforts to involve students and social workers who were not frontliners brought up a sense of personal/professional inadequacy as illustrated by, "I'm not trained enough to do HIV/AIDS work." Social workers need to feel more comfortable responding to the unexpected and unknown. As educators, we need to prepare our students more effectively to address uncertain situations, in large part by reassuring them that they have the requisite skills and to seek consultation as needed. Again, the family camping experience gave them an opportunity to experience this directly in a supportive environment. I met with staff throughout the weekend, and we debriefed the session at the conclusion of the weekend.

This sense of inadequacy was echoed by some of the camp volunteers during the debriefing session. Staff had completed written evaluations and were invited to share their perspective regarding the highs and the lows of the weekend in the group meeting. I set an example by sharing how hard certain moments were for me and by inviting them to help me think how I could have handled it differently. One queried, "Why didn't you tell us the about the kids' (especially the adolescents) histories? They have so

many issues and anger, I didn't feel prepared." I shared that I had elected to not disclose specific aspects of their histories because the written descriptions of some of the campers were so negative that a strengths-oriented perspective would be all but impossible and probably would have kept some of the volunteers from coming. I noted that throughout the weekend, all volunteers had access to consultation services from seasoned HIV staff who helped clarify the issues raised by

posing questions such as: Where is the strengths-based approach that we talk about in social work? These adolescents have every right to be angry about the intrusion of HIV into their lives. How would any of us respond to losing one or more members of our family? We focused on how to help them channel that energy in a way that helps them cope more effectively. I was energized by the creativity of the staff. Bearing witness to a person confronting his/her mortality creates anxiety and all too often people turn inward toward their own issues instead of being present for the individual who is struggling with an uncertain future. Our ongoing consultation and debriefing helped us stay present with the families.

I am known for challenging my students to dare to "flub" or experience failure. I firmly believe that some of the best

learning happens when we "flub"; yet, I caught myself being afraid to do just that. As I intervened with the divorced couple described earlier, I found myself trying to "settle" their conflict with the hopes of getting the experience back on track for them and the rest of the camp community. As I reflected



on my work, I realized they needed to resolve the issue between them and I had to relinquish my perceived control for this to happen. So, during our follow up meeting, I shared with the staff that I had flubbed and we reworked the issue. Admitting a mistake is easier to say than to do. A few of the students were surprised that I shared my mistake with them. We explored different ways the situation could have been handled and speculated about the effectiveness of each.

The potential for human growth is promising when a person feels supported in making changes. I have learned that the reality of HIV may give the gift of reassessing your life and making needed changes in order to make the best of what you have in the face of uncertainty. This conflicts with my MSW training which emphasized the negative consequences of life-threatening illness, the relative inability to change characterological traits, and focused on problems instead of strengths. In all honesty, a significant portion of my professional training

would lead me to focus on what the family *could not* do versus acknowledging the changes the family members have made and the resulting growth. It is easy to lose sight of the saying, "Each person is doing the best that s/he can at that moment in time." I have learned to think "outside of the box" and to be willing to approach novel situations with an open mind.

HIV work causes each of us to confront mortality, our clients' and our own. At 43, I have attended far more funerals than I would have if I were not working in HIV/AIDS. For each person who passes, their families, partners, friends, communities, and caregivers are left to incorporate each life and each loss. So many left behind cope in silence with little opportunity to acknowledge the impact of this loss on their lives. I have worked hard to note and honor those losses by the use of rituals and ways of honoring those who have died. At the School, we have a graduation award, named for a student who died of AIDS-related complications. This award is given to a student who excels in either substance abuse or HIV/AIDS work. One of the students from Family Unity will receive this award this year in recognition of the contributions he made to Family Unity.

The reflection service the last morning of camp gave us a chance to remember, to honor, and to renew our commitments to those who have passed, and to help their survivors. The reflection service uncovered the raw pain inherent in lives lost

too early. The pain is immense but the sense of community and caring in the chapel helped to buffer that. Many parents turn to us to be sure that their children are cared for in the future; we must honor this. Increasing the bonds among HIV-affected families is one way to help with this by creating a caring community. Watching people embrace each other as memories and dreams were shared was renewing.

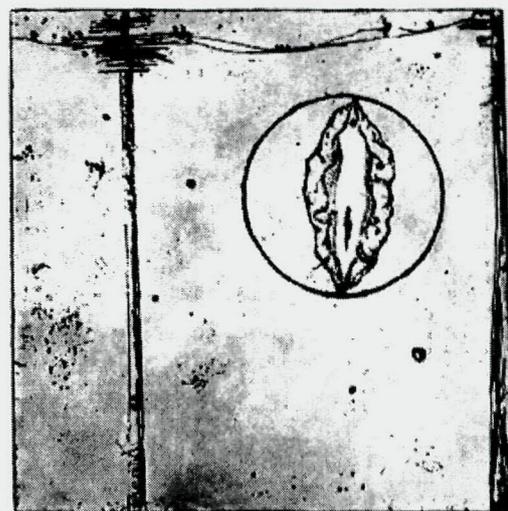
We have made a difference in each other's lives. My life has been enriched immeasurably by the opportunity to work with families. On a personal level, I see the benefits for my children who are involved in Family Unity; their belief in a caring community is refreshing and gives hope that our future will be brighter.

While I resist being characterized as an "old timer" in the HIV/AIDS field, I am. Few of us who have been doing HIV/AIDS work for more than a decade remain in the field. This experience gave me an opportunity to reflect on my contributions to the field and to critically assess what contribution I can make as we approach the year 2000.

Shortly before the weekend, I sensed that this would be a turning point, that perhaps I had done all that I could in HIV. I believe that it is important to question where you have been and where you hope to go in the future. HIV/AIDS work is demanding and challenging. At times the conflicts inherent in HIV work and the ongoing challenge of coping with multiple losses has called into question

my ability to be effective. AIDS work is a transforming experience in that it permanently alters your world view by simultaneously highlighting the best and the worst aspects of our society. Certainly my role has changed and is evolving in new ways. Family Unity was more than any of us had hoped for; it was an opportunity for growth and connection for all who participated. For me, this experience renewed my sense of optimism and I look forward to Family Unity II this summer.

The gift of HIV/AIDS is that it makes you live in the moment and capture as much life as you can. This is a lesson that all of us should heed. □



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