

From Client's Grassroots Efforts The Living Room Celebrates a New Decade As a Project of WestCare

HIV/AIDS Services Alive and Well in Fresno

The Living Room, a project of WestCare is proof that ordinary people who think that they don't have much power can affect long term change. The seed was planted in 1990 by clients empowering themselves, to the opening of The Living Room in 1996 and now a new decade of service under the direction of WestCare California.

On a summer evening in 1990 the weekly HIV support group at Central Valley AIDS Team was about to start. Most of the participants had been coming to group for over a year and were feeling like they really were beyond sitting around in a circle and talking about how miserable their lives were, particularly since they didn't really feel miserable, but instead happy to have the quality of life they enjoyed. Yet the group did provide the support they needed and wanted from their peers that were also living with HIV. From that support group the group called Open Heart was formed. Open Heart began meeting every other Wednesday evening and was hosted in different members homes. Members would bring snacks and sodas, a video movie to watch or an activity to participate in such as pumpkin carving contests at Halloween or making holiday ornaments at Christmas.

By 1992 almost 100 HIV positive individuals were participating in Open Heart. At this time in the AIDS crisis people were still dying at alarming rates and many of the 100 participants were falling ill and dying. By 1995 over 80 members had passed away and in 1996 only 3 of the group's leaders were left and all 3 were ill. Ed Comes, Rod Jessen and Jules Mastro had been keeping the group alive but knew that soon they would also pass and then the social support that had been so important for people living with HIV in Fresno County would be gone forever.

In early 1996 Mastro was talking with a good friend, a former Catholic Nun who lived in Chicago. Expressing his sadness at the groups demise she said "You know I tithe, but not to a church, to different organizations that need my help. I could tithe \$500.00 a month to your group if you can put something together".

Excited about this prospect Mastro talked with Comes and Jessen and a woman named Rocky Flint who had formerly been an HIV Case Manager at CVAT. Flint suggested talking to Richard Stone from the Fresno Center For Nonviolence. Stone presented the idea to the Center's Board of Directors who thought it would be a wonderful project for the center to take under it's umbrella. On April 1, 1996, The Living Room opened its doors at 985 N. Van Ness as a 12 hours a week drop-in center for those infected with HIV. The mission was "To Encourage and Support the Well Being and Empowerment of Persons Infected and Affected by HIV/AIDS."

Two weeks after opening Ed Comes passed away, Jules Mastro was running the center and Rod Jessen attended to the groups accounting functions. There were many people involved in the formation of the organization, too many to name, but a few included Cindy Brown, who had taken care of many AIDS patients and who was around to always help out and Earlyne Kidder, who at the time was in her mid 80's and had been the first volunteer case manager for Central Valley AIDS Team.

In the early fall of 1996 two gentlemen with big hearts and a desire to help others appeared, Mike Judy and Jerry Ledbetter. By this time the new AIDS cocktail was available, Mastro who thought he would die and The Living Room would be left to others to run was still there and Jessen was doing better and still attending to the accounting functions. When Mike and Jerry appeared on the scene things began to change, now besides Mastro there were 2 others to help run the center, the hours increased and soon hot lunches began to be served.

In 1998 The Living Room incorporated as a 501C3 non-profit organization and on April 1, 1999 moved to 420 N. Broadway. On December 31, 1999, Rod Jessen passed away from complications of AIDS.

In the year 2000, Kathy May brought case management services to The Living Room. These services are now headed by Toni Harrison a New York transplant with a strong dedication and passion to clients and the services they receive. Also in 2000 The Living Room secured education and prevention contracts and moved from an all-volunteer staff to a paid staff.

In 2001 The Living Room became the largest AIDS service organization in Central California. Services were enhanced, new services and programs added, and the staff grew to 15 people.

On January 9, 2001, The Living Room Food Pantry was established at 601 E. Belmont. The primary function of the pantry was to provide nutritious food for clients of The Living Room and other AIDS service providers in Fresno County. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the United Way of Fresno County funded this program. After 911 FEMA was merged with Homeland Security and the funding dried up. Now, in 2007 the pantry is being resurrected with funding from Kaiser and Ryan White Care Funds.

In 2003 a contract from Fresno County Human Services allowed The Living Room to provide additional services to HIV positives to prevent the transmission of HIV from HIV positive individuals to HIV negative individuals. Originally the program was called PALS, Positives Alive and Living Safe. The Prevention with Positives program still exists and gets to the very core of the founding principals of The Living Room in providing positive support and education to HIV positives to help boost self esteem resulting in productive, contributing members of society to help stamp out the spread of HIV in Fresno County.

In May of 2001 The Living Room purchased the building that now houses The Living Room Health and Wellness Center at 601 E. Belmont. The building is 15,000 square feet and accommodates the entire Living Room operations as well as WestCare California Outpatient Treatment Programs.

In the early fall of 2002, Mastro still Executive Director and facing funding decreases projected that within the next year The Living Room Financial picture would change from black ink to red ink. Having seen the demise of Central Valley AIDS Team because of the same situation Mastro knew that quick action was needed in order to preserve HIV services in Fresno County.

A phone call to friend Shawn Jenkins of WestCare California, a community partner and longtime provider of HIV education prevention and substance abuse services began the ball rolling. The next month Jenkins along with Mastro attended The Living Room Board of Directors meeting and a merger was put into play. Jenkins then presented the idea to the powers that be at WestCare's corporate offices in Las Vegas who gave their blessing. In December 2002 the Board of Directors of WestCare California approved the merger.

On January 1, 2003 WestCare California, Inc. and The Living Room began the process of a total merger that was completed on April 1, 2003. On January 1, 2003 WestCare began operating the pantry and kitchen and employing the staff of both programs. On April 1, 2003 all other contracts were transferred to WestCare California. This bold move is a result of the unprecedented growth of The Living Room since its inception in 1996 and insures the long-term sustainability of HIV services and growth of The Living Room. The Living Room remains as a project of WestCare, programs and services remain intact with changes that reflect emerging needs. Operations have been enhanced including the facility, administration, accounting and human resources.

Well it is true that the days of staff wearing cut offs and flip flops to work is gone, the spirit of Open Heart and The Living Room, a place to belong still thrives at the drop in health and wellness center for those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. Uplifting the human spirit, the commitment of WestCare California provides HIV/AIDS services in Fresno County with a bright future.

Current Services

HIV/AIDS Education, Prevention and Care Information & Referrals

Information and referral to the community for HIV testing, education and prevention, care services and substance abuse treatment.

Drop-in Center

Open Monday – Friday from 9-4 the drop-in center is open to any client of The Living Room & HIV positive clients of any community partner agency. Drop in clients are encouraged through peer support to take charge of their lives and live healthier and happier in a productive manner with a positive attitude. Some of the activities available at

the drop-in center include support groups, hot lunches, a big screen TV, snacks, telephone available for client use, social support, pool table, art classes and monthly game nights with prizes and dinner.

Case Management/Client Advocacy

Ryan White HIV Case Management/Client Advocacy services include the development of individual ongoing case plans with goals, periodic review and modifications. Additionally benefits counseling, coordination with other service providers, housing assistance, financial assistance, and information & referral resources are provided.

Food Pantry

Provides nutritious food to supplement the diets of The Living Room and other HIV/AIDS service providers clients in Fresno County.

HIV Legal Services

Prevention With Positives

PWP is an education and prevention program for HIV positive individuals designed to support and empower them to practice safer sexual and other behaviors to prevent the transmission of HIV. To accomplish this, PWP combines education, skills building, behavior change, social and emotional support for clients. .

MSM (Men who have sex with Men) Prevention Services

The Living Room provides HIV education & prevention services to men who have sex with men their sex partners. The program includes outreach and multi-session groups and is designed to promote and support safer behaviors to reduce HIV infection

Substance Users Education and Prevention Services

Services include HIV education and prevention services to clients enrolled in WestCare inpatient and outpatient substance abuse treatment programs. The program is designed to promote behavior change to reduce the risk of HIV infection with side affects of reducing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and hepatitis B & C.

Special Events

Part of The Living Room health and wellness program and experience includes special events. Special events scheduled periodically include support for people living with HIV/AIDS. Events may be social in nature, include clinical practitioners, focus on education and prevention or celebrate holidays.