

Upper Valley's ACoRN Growing

Bennett Law

LEBANON, NH -- On August 7, Peggy Whiteneck of Richmond, Vermont, became the first full-time employee of ACoRN (AIDS Community Awareness Resource Network), the AIDS service organization (ASO) serving the communities of the Upper Valley. Whiteneck will serve as Executive Director and HIV Education and Prevention Coordinator, and plans to emphasize her education and prevention responsibilities.

ACoRN has only recently made the leap from an all volunteer effort to securing a paid, professional staff. In addition to bringing in Whiteneck, ACoRN currently supports two part-time positions, a Coordinator of MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) Programs and a Volunteer Coordinator/Office Manager, and is also recruiting applicants for its first full-time Client Services Coordinator.

This is Whiteneck's first experience working for an AIDS service organization. Starting in 1981, Whiteneck served on the administrative team of a rehabilitation hospital and long-term care facility in Miami, Florida. A year ago she returned to New England, where she was born and raised, on a sabbatical which she devoted to her writing. At the end of that year, she made the decision to remain in Vermont, and reported finding "clarity of purpose" when she became aware of this opportunity at ACoRN.



(Photo: Bennett Law)
ACoRN Executive Director Peggy Whiteneck

Whiteneck stated that she was attracted to the "culture" at ACoRN: the Board of Directors, the members of which are voted into office by the agency's clients and volunteers at an annual meeting, operate by consensus agreement and facilitate the participation of the clients in the operation of the agency.

In considering the immediate priorities of the agency, Whiteneck noted that her main concern is the potential for burn out of the volunteers. "The agency has been operating for four years without professional back-up. The critical priority right now is to get sufficient energy and support into the infrastructure so that the volunteers feel supported in their efforts."

"ACoRN, for all its smallness and lack of professional expertise, has been effective enough that other ASO's expect a great deal from ACoRN. They expect a level of professionalism from the organization," said Whiteneck. She anticipates that the expertise of the agency will be challenged by the requirements for quality of care and accountability imposed by its external funding organizations, requirements that she recognizes as "valid and needed."

As Executive Director, Whiteneck hopes to play a supporting role. "It's easy for an Executive Director to get in people's way. I want to be a catalyst." The leadership model she aspires to is to be "effective, but invisible in terms of obstacles to the functioning of others in the organization."

Whiteneck is enthusiastic about the challenges ahead of her. "I hope to be able to make a positive contribution to prevention of HIV infection. I hope to be a compassionate presence for those already infected/affected by AIDS, whether the infected individual or their significant others. I hope that I can make a significant contribution to the growth of ACoRN without getting in its way."

"It's so refreshing to be able to come into an organization and discover already that there is a compelling vision. They know and can articulate what and who they are. I don't need to provide that to them." Whiteneck concluded, "I am lucky -- I am real lucky to have found this organization." ▼

Memorial Quilt

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traditional fabric and thread. The Quilt in its entirety is made up of 30,899 panels, totaling the size of 12 football fields. New panels, commemorating the lives of Vermonters who have died of AIDS-related illness, will be displayed separately and included in the NAMES Project Quilt as part of the closing ceremonies on December 2.

Those who have seen the Quilt concur that it is a powerful experience, and often surprisingly so. "I don't think people are aware of what they'll get from this," said Dave Landers, Ceremonies co-chair. "It's a very powerful statement about AIDS ... It personalizes the epidemic. We forget that it's not just numbers. This is a celebration of 872 individuals and individual stories." Paul Olsen, organizer of the Interfaith Service, agreed, "I think living in Vermont ... seeing the Quilt helped me understand the magnitude (of the epidemic) ... You realize just how big this really is."

Landers, like many of his peers on Project Remembrance, see the Quilt as an awareness raising tool. With many school groups attending, Landers hopes for a subsequent willingness on the part of school administrators who see the display to include AIDS education in their curriculum. He also plans to have at least one team of volunteers at the opening ceremonies made up of school board and parent/teacher organization members. In addition, part of the Quilt's power is in getting people to think twice about infection and the risk factors associated with HIV. It is both a celebration of lives and a reminder of what HIV infection can do. Said Olsen, "If we change the behavior of one person as a result of ... this project, it's worth it."

Does the Quilt fight homophobia, or work against the stigma of AIDS as a "gay disease"? "Hopefully," said Landers, "That's part of humanizing." Landers described the panel made in memory of Burlington's Church Street "Pretzel Man," Chris Reed, which will be included as part of the NAMES Project in December. It features a pretzel cart, a depiction of Church Street, and cows. "You think of Chris, not a gay man who died," he said.

Olsen mentioned the breadth of the kinds of people included in the Quilt, as well as the scheduled address by Jeanne White. Ryan White was a hemophiliac, and Ms. White, "does her part to address that issue (i.e. homophobia)." The Quilt, he said, "is real ... people from from all walks of life."

The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt will be displayed at Tarrant Recreation Center on the Saint Michael's College campus in Colchester, with the following schedule:

Monday, November 27 - Community Interfaith Service beginning at 7:00pm, Saint Michael's Chapel

Thursday, November 30 - Display open 7:00-9:00pm; opening ceremonies at 7:00pm

Friday, December 1 - Display open 9:00am-9:00pm

Saturday, December 2 - Display open 9:00am-6:00pm; closing ceremonies at 6:00pm

All events are free and open to the public. Donations will benefit Vermont CARES. For more information call the Saint Michael's College public relations office at (802)654-2535. ▼

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