



'It's all around us. It's not this obscure thing that only happens to other people.'

One college student learns the worldwide fight against AIDS begins by helping victims in her community.

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By Sheila Hagar of the Union-Bulletin

A quarter-century after AIDS surfaced in the United States, the disease's death toll has eclipsed almost 30 million people worldwide. An estimated 40 million more live with the disease.

As of this year, Washington state has reported close to 15,000 AIDS/HIV cases, 66 in Walla Walla County. Throughout the state, 40 percent of people so diagnosed have died.

Friday - World AIDS Day - has been designated as a time to let such numbers sink in.

The disease first got the attention of the Centers for Disease Control in 1981.

Its name - acquired immune deficiency syndrome - was coined in 1982.

Whitman College student Caitlin Chapman wouldn't be born for another two years.

Before Chapman, now 22, entered kindergarten, a new AIDS case was reported every 14 minutes according to the CDC.

A quarter of a century after the disease was identified in gay men in the United States, Chapman has come to be profoundly touched by the illness.

Fueled by an interest in global public health, her awareness of the politics of the disease was spiked on a trip to Kenya in the fall of 2005. There, Chapman became critical of the very organizations she had imagined someday joining.

The realization led her to understand what she could do in her own community, she said.

She couldn't know then how AIDS would come to affect her, up close and personal, this past spring.

It began with a project for an anthropology class taught by Whitman professor Suzanne Morrissey.

Her goal as an educator was to introduce students to field work, Morrissey said.

Of which there are many forms. Chapman, majoring in anthropology, chose "a very ambitious project," the instructor said. The student would take in-depth life histories of AIDS patients.

With extensive interviews, Chapman set about to gather the stories and experiences of those living and dying from one of the most perplexing diseases of modern times.

She approached four Walla Walla AIDS patients whom Morrissey chose through her other day job as executive director of Blue Mountain Heart to Heart.

The nonprofit agency serves those affected by AIDS and HIV in Walla Walla county and beyond, helping about 30 clients a year with housing, food, counseling, medication management and financial assistance.

It was definitely a biased selection, Morrissey said of the clientele she asked to help Chapman. She selected those willing to indulge the project, ``and who would benefit from a relationship with her.

Some victims are too angry, too mentally ill, too involved with an unhealthy lifestyle to be able to reach out to others with what they know about AIDS, Morrissey explained.

Chapman had more than handpicked subjects and ambition going for her. ``She went into the project very open-minded, with open-ended questions," the professor remembered. ``Caitlin did a wonderful job of establishing relationships with her interview subjects."

Her time overseas showed Chapman that the stigma and lack of education about the disease know no international boundaries.

``You would think we'd have moved past that," she said while she worked on an exhibit of her thesis project on a mezzanine in Reid Campus Center.

The attention to AIDS of the 1980s has waned while the social and moral judgments have not, Chapman found.

Sitting back on her heels, she trimmed pictures and pasted transcripts onto poster board. While some clients had requested their identities be cloaked, Dennis Shepherd grinned openly from his photo; his happy countenance shows no sign AIDS would claim his life just a short time later.

Shepherd was 46.

Chapman paused before the half-hung display. ``Dennis' death was really sad. I got really close to these people."

Shepherd would have encouraged the exhibit, Chapman believes. ``He was really an amazing person. He was excited, he wanted to have a chance to educate people," she said. ``If he could prevent even one person from contracting AIDS, everything that he has gone through since his diagnosis will have been worth it."

Others in Chapman's project were less trusting of public opinion. ``Luis" would not allow his real name to be on display, she said. Yet what he had to say applies to many:

``I no have scared. I'm ready because I live with my problem because he's my friend. He's my best friend. He goes with me. He go with me to everywhere, to walk, to eat, to sleep, to everything. He lives in me."

The ``friend" is AIDS, Chapman confirms. She believes Luis found solace in embracing his illness, making peace with its presence. ``It's a coping mechanism."

Chapman understands the subject can cause discomfort, which may interfere with seeing the current picture of the disease.

``For the most part, it doesn't seem like people are being intentionally malicious. It's just a lack of education."

As she told others of her project outline, it was difficult for them to comprehend the issue as it pertains to the Walla Walla Valley, she found. ``It's all around us. It's not this obscure thing that only happens

to other people."

She knows. While she doesn't have the illness, AIDS has happened to her, Chapman said, wrapping her arms around herself. Her interview subjects shared so much of their lives as she spent time with them - letters they had written, stories of rape and abuse, she said. ``But good things, too."

Until she returns home to Seattle, the young woman plans to continue contact through her volunteer work at Heart to Heart. The gift of time is what she has to offer in return, Chapman believes.

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