

Complacency won't bring a cure for HIV/AIDS

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I have a picture of my brother Scott and me. We are standing together posing for the camera, and he is hugging me with his arm around my head because that is how he always hugged me. Scott was a handsome, strong and wise man with a wonderful sense of humor. My brother would have been 55 years old this year, but in 2000 he died from AIDS.

When we were growing up, it was clear that he had a brilliant artistic mind. He loved fashion and, after high school, he moved to New York City to study at Parsons School for Design. While he was in New York, he received Fulbright and Lusk Foundation grants to study fashion design at the Domus Academy in Milan in the heart of the fashion industry. While there, he was "discovered" by the great designer Diego de la Valle.

And that is when my brother found his niche and his design passion: women's dress shoes. Eventually, he created his own line of shoes - Scott Rankin shoes - that were sold around the world. His beautiful women's shoes were works of art.

In 1999, my brother came back to the United States for a fashion footwear show in New York. He called me before he left Italy and talked about being exhausted. So we decided that he would come and spend some time with me in Florida and take a rest.

When he got off the plane, I knew something was terribly wrong. We went to a clinic for a check-up, and when we returned for all the test results, the doctor sent him to the emergency room because he was in renal failure. While he was in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), they ran more tests, and that is when we found out he had HIV and that the disease had progressed to an AIDS diagnosis. Within a month, my brother had died.

My brother's disease changed my life. After he died, I made a point of being involved in organizations that were working to prevent HIV and to help people living with this devastating disease. That is how I discovered HIV Alliance in Eugene.

Today is World AIDS Day. In 1981, the first cases of AIDS - the end stage of the disease HIV - were discovered. Since that time, more than 30 million people worldwide have died of HIV-related causes. Every 9.5 minutes someone in the United States is infected with this disease. And, while there are new, really quite miraculous medications that help people living with HIV to live longer and better lives, there is still no cure. And many people living with this disease still struggle with their health, their ability to work, and HIV-related stigma.

We should be proud that Oregon embraced many HIV prevention strategies early on. These strategies significantly dropped the number of new infections in our state. But, for those of us living in "rural" counties, we face particular challenges in fighting this disease. First, many more people are diagnosed late in the progression of HIV. This means that they have had the disease longer, were unaware of their infection, and could have been infecting other people without knowing. And second, we have seen significant reductions in federal prevention funding for rural, "lower prevalence" areas. For example, in HIV Alliance's 11-county service region, only three counties still receive prevention funding. In fact, there are only seven counties in the state of Oregon that continue to receive prevention funding. Because we have achieved many successes with this disease, we have also become complacent. As a result, new infection rates in youth are rising.

We must look at ways to fill these prevention gaps, and we should support organizations that are taking actions to do so. As adults, we have a responsibility to do everything we can to talk with our children and other youth about this disease and about sexuality. We need to keep this issue in the forefront of the public's mind. While HIV is less prevalent here, it has not gone away. It has been more than 30 years since the first cases of HIV were discovered, and while we have made great strides, people are still becoming infected with and dying from HIV/AIDS. We must do everything we can to reach this year's World AIDS Day goal of achieving an "AIDS-free generation."

On Friday, Dec. 5, the HIV Alliance will be celebrating World AIDS Day and the organization's 20th anniversary with an art show at the Eugene Piano Academy featuring the work of clients and others affected by HIV/AIDS. I will be there with my brother's shoes and my red dress on, and I hope to see you there.

Joelle Rankins Goodwin is a longtime Oregon resident, a 1986 University of Oregon graduate and a 24-year Army veteran. She currently works in the University of Oregon Admissions Office as assistant director for alumni recruitment. She is a former board member for the HIV Alliance.