

# 'Everybody knows Jews don't get AIDS'

By IRIS M. SAMSON, Assistant Editor

"AIDS happens to nice people. It happens to Jewish people, and it happens to nice Jewish people."

Beverly Pollock has a distant look in her eyes as she recounts the pain she and her husband, Mel endured losing their youngest son, Robert -- "Bobby" -- to AIDS a little over a year ago.

"Everybody knows Jews don't get AIDS," she says with sarcasm. And to judge by the lack of support facilities in the Pittsburgh area for Jews with AIDS, she is right. But she and Mel -- along with help from Jewish Family and Children's Service and the United Jewish Federation -- are trying to bring the issue to the forefront of the community.

When Bobby was in high school, he told his parents that he was gay. The youngest of four children in a loving typically suburban 1970's family, Mel and Beverly felt for their child.

"You love your kid, and that's the most important thing," Beverly recalls. "You feel bad for him, because you know that society doesn't understand, and that life will be harder for him."

Bobby told his parents later that he always knew he was different, "even as a kid. But just because he had a different sexual orientation didn't make him a bad person," his mother emphasizes.

"Like any kid, he grew up mischievous. He was a lot of fun, he had a tremendous wit. Bobby was a devil, a precious boy."

He was accepted by his siblings, sisters Susan and Sally and brother Larry. Following the norm wasn't for him: Beverly recalls that he tried college, but decided he could "make a living without his diploma. When he was about 20, he went to Los Angeles, and stayed there. He got a job as a waiter at Ma Maison, a very famous restaurant there, and saw what he could do on his own." Bobby later went into respiratory therapy at Cedar Sinai Hospital, where a former customer at Ma Maison recognized him "as the guy who cut her fish. It was singer-actress Bette Midler, who wanted to know where Bobby's French accent had gone," Beverly recalls with a wide smile.

A "good kid, and good professional, Bobby's work took him to Kaiser Permanente Hospital in LA, where he was much loved. At his memorial service there, one of the doctors who worked with him said it was a real tragedy, because Bobby could never be replaced."

Bobby wasn't ashamed of his sexual orientation, according to his mother, "but coming out was not popular in the 1970's." Moving to California allowed him more freedom and acceptance; his move to the field of respiratory therapy also made him more aware of his health.

"He read everything," Beverly remembers. In 1980, she happened upon an article that spoke of the "plague" afflicting the homosexual community, AIDS. "I hid it from Mel, and he hid it from me." But shortly after, Bobby was to tell his parents that he was HIV-positive, the precursor to AIDS.

"He was one of the earliest ones to get sick," his mother explains. "But he made sure he took very good care of himself. Bobby watched his diet, and ate well, trying to keep his weight up. He really didn't get sick until four months before he died," unlike many AIDS sufferers who waste away for months and years.

Though the Pollock family talked about Bobby's illness, "we really didn't want to hear. Parents are supposed to die before your children, and Mel and I were in denial," Beverly says, sadly. "Because Bobby looked so good, it was hard to believe he was sick." And because he lived thousands of miles away, his parents didn't see his condition change as frequently as those with loved ones nearby.

Bobby was given the medication, AZT, which slows the course of the illness. He also read all available literature, and took experimental medicines. But in October, 1990, AIDS caught up.

Beverly and Mel rushed to California to care for their son, who was close to death. But then began the first of three "miracles," according to his family. Always close to his nieces and nephews, Bobby spoiled them with gifts. Bedridden on October 5, he wasn't expected to live longer than three weeks. But Hanuka was coming.

Mel and Beverly, after caring for Bobby full-time, took three days off. When they came back, miraculously Bobby was walking.

His brother, Larry, and friend, Mike, put him in a wheelchair and took him shopping. "The doctors couldn't understand his remission, but we knew it was because he wanted to buy Hanuka presents for his family," Beverly says.

His remission lasted about



IN HAPPIER times -- Bobby, front, and friends.

three weeks, "long enough" to take care of his business; then he began to go downhill.

The second "miracle" was connected with Bobby's old car. California's emission laws are stringent, and his Datsun was due for a test. The Pollocks had much on their mind; fixing the car wasn't a priority. But they needed the auto for errands.

After an especially difficult day with Bobby, who was then losing his sight, Mel took a walk down an unfamiliar street. He came upon a service station, and asked to see the boss.

"Mel told him his son was critically ill, and that we really needed a car to drive," recalls Beverly. When the man asked Bobby's age and Mel replied 35, the station owner told him about his own son, who died four months earlier of AIDS at 32.

"He told Mel he'd fix the car right away. Bobby died a week later (on Feb. 3, 1991). And it turned out," Beverly continues, "that the

guy was an Arab. But he and Mel broke down together, hugging and crying."

Bobby was also always a "kibbitzer," his mom recalls with a smile. The third sign came during his funeral procession. Sister Susan had asked him to give the family a sign after his death, to let them know he was okay.

In the middle of the funeral procession, the entire party was pulled to the side of the road. "A young kid had broken into the line," Beverly says, "and the funeral director began to yell. All at once, with our hearts breaking, we started laughing -- that's Bobby's signal."

Support groups abounded in California: the Pollocks went to two, one connected with a nearby Temple. "But when we came home, there was no Jewish group for us. We felt that we were it," Beverly says. "Jews may be individually involved in helping, they may work for various organizations, but

there is no organized Jewish support group."

She and Mel decided to do something about it. "There is such an affection among AIDS people. You want so much to help other people, to repay them for helping you. They literally kept us alive."

Most Jewish communities have done little about AIDS in the east, from a Jewish viewpoint. "Jews are always the first to help people who need help," Beverly laments. "We're the first to jump in. Yet here are our own, and people are afraid to say anything. They think it's a stigma, but how can you call a victim a stigma?"

Beverly, who is the former director of communications for the UJF, contacted the local JFCS. With support from Federation, they are sponsoring a meeting on Sunday, April 26 for "Jews with AIDS in the family." Speakers will be Dr. David Weinbaum of West Penn Hospital who treats AIDS/HIV, and Mark Friedman, director of development for Persad. At the meeting, participants -- who will remain on a first name basis only -- will be asked their needs, and how they feel the Jewish community can respond.

The Pollocks have become active with several AIDS groups, including Persad's support network, the Shepherd Wellness Center, initiated by an Episcopal church in Hazelwood, and the Pittsburgh Aids Task Force. They have found special strength through Shepherd. "The Wellness Center has been a godsend,"

Beverly asserts.

"Support groups help you work through your pain," Beverly explains of her mission to get the Jewish community involved. "It's not easy, it's a very difficult thing." Another outlet for both Mel and Beverly has been through the arts. Mel is a well-known artist, who takes classes with Bruno Sorrento and teaches at East Hills Elementary School through Generations Together.

Beverly has used her writing background to help keep Bobby's memory alive. She takes courses at the University of Pittsburgh, and uses AIDS, homosexuality, and the loss of her son as a topic in her poetry class with Toi Derricott, and in playwriting with Dr. Kathleen George.

"In addition to being a student, I try to work out my own internal pain," Beverly explains. "It just hurts. I'm writing a play and poetry about Bobby -- it not only works through my pain and helps my survival, but, more importantly, it helps keep Bobby alive."

The Pollocks have gone on speaking engagements for the AIDS task force, and hope they can help others. "Our decision to go public is that it is our only way to help Bobby, to keep him alive -- and to help others. The more people don't talk about it, the more they perpetuate the stigma," she concludes, simply.

For information about the meeting, call JFCS, 683-4900, and ask for Debbie Levenstein or Rachel Dinkin Rosen.

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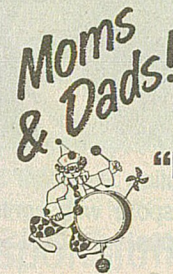
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