

Walking for a brother taken away by AIDS

Bob Welch

The Register-Guard

May 20, 2007

(Copyright 2007 The Register-Guard. All rights reserved.)

As she's done annually for 18 years, Mary Watts did her AIDS Walk on May 5 to raise money for Lane County HIV Alliance.

Nevermind that the HIV Alliance Riverwalk and Run had been canceled long before.

That wasn't about to stop Watts, 51, who lost her brother, Bryce, to AIDS 15 years ago this month. So, though she usually showed up by herself, this time she sent invitations to family and friends to join her on the 2.5-mile walk along the Willamette River, starting at Alton Baker Park, to help raise money for the HIV Alliance.

Same time. Same place. Same bittersweet memories.

"Bryce and I were close," she remembers.

"We picked on our little sister together and feared our older brothers together. He could make you laugh so hard your stomach would hurt."

They grew up in Eugene, then Springfield, where their father was the pastor at the Springfield Seventh Day Church of God.

At 17, she married, a decision she would later regret. At 19, Bryce was briefly engaged. When the relationship ended, he left for San Francisco. When he returned, he told Mary the news: He was gay.

He was, she said, more worried about the repercussions than she was.

"He didn't want to face people, all the stuff that goes along with it. I thought he was just being dramatic."

But some people distanced themselves from Bryce. Her parents chose simply to not talk about it. "Denial," she says.

Bryce moved to Hawaii and met a man, Mark Huggins, who would become his life partner.

As Mary's marriage crumbled, then ended in divorce, Bryce became her support. With Mary not receiving child-support money, Bryce paid for her older

daughter, Michelle, to take ballet lessons. He flew in to watch his niece perform in "The Nutcracker" at the Hult Center, bringing her a rose. Took the two of them to a Dance Theatre of Harlem production in Portland.

As Bryce got sick with what turned out to be AIDS, Mary became his support. It was the late '80s, pre-Internet days. Mary started reading books and articles, and making phone calls to research drugs that might help save her brother's life.

When she finally found a medication that might help, she learned it wasn't FDA-approved. And expensive. She decided on a fundraiser.

She went to her parents about sending letters to people in the church and to other churches affiliated with it, filled with people who had known Bryce his whole life.

She was leery of her folks' response. "I'd seen a lot of hypocrisy in the church, growing up," she says.

But her parents, Billy and Dorothy, were all for it. "This went against their belief system, but they loved their son," she says.

Still, this was a time when some people were more likely to believe that AIDS was God's punishment for homosexuals. "I had a feeling I was going to catch some harsh, judgmental stuff from people in the church," she says.

She got only one such response.

As the years passed, Bryce got thinner and sicker. He died on Mother's Day in 1992. At a gathering, her father made some remarks about Bryce, about his love for his son, then turned to Mark.

"You'll always be part of our family," he said.

Five years later, Mark died.

At first, it was just Mary and her daughter Becca at Alton Baker Park on May 5. Then a few others arrived. Then more.

When the walk finally began, more than 25 people were in the group. They raised \$1,400 for the Lane County HIV Alliance. And they plan to do the walk each year on the Saturday before Mother's Day.

Among those not at the event was her father, Billy. He died in 1998, just a few months after Mark's death from AIDS. He had been in an automobile accident.

At the time, he was taking people to church.

Bob Welch can be reached at 338-2354 or at bwelch@guardnet.com.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.