

November 7, 2011

BENEFITS PACKAGE

POSITIVE SERVICE

AIDS SERVICE CENTER CELEBRATES 20 YEARS OF SERVICE TO THE HIV/AIDS COMMUNITY.

By 1991 scientists and activists were beginning to better understand the AIDS epidemic and what it meant for gay men. The early days of confusion, fear mongering and government silence were mostly past and it had been three years since the CDC had mailed an AIDS information pamphlet to every household in the country. While organizations like ACT UP and GMHC were arranging grassroots efforts to get prevention and educative information disseminated en masse, a grassroots organization called AIDS Service Center was forming in New York to provide health and social services to HIV positive members of the community. Tonight, AIDS Service Center celebrates 20 years of successfully keeping our friends healthy and active with a gala at Bryant Park Grill to benefit their continuing efforts.

"I had a lot of friends, particularly my male gay friends, who were getting sick and dying in the early years," says Sharen Duke, executive director of AIDS Service Center. "It made me want to help and give back and so I got involved." Duke was the center's first executive director, and she has been with them for the two decades since. "I had never been an executive director before and essentially the founding board of directors that hired me took a risk on me," says Duke. Since her initiation, Duke has seen the center grow from a staff of three with an annual budget of less than \$200,000 to a network of four sites around New York with a 100-person staff and an \$8 million annual budget. "Twenty years later, I'd like to say that it was a good risk!" Duke laughs.

"This 20th year represents stability for clients and stability and positive changes for staff and our management division," says Brenda Starks-Ross, deputy executive director of AIDS Service Center. "For me the first client is the staff," she continues. "Our staff—a little bit more than 25% used to be clients," Starks-Ross points out. "People have to find inner courage to walk through our doors," Duke says. "We provide the support, nurturing and safety. It is the client that does the hard work."

What distinguishes the AIDS Service Center from other nonprofit HIV/AIDS organizations is twofold. The center has partnerships with area hospitals as well as a peer education and training program. "We bring our community expertise to connect people with medical care," the director says. "In addition to that [our volunteers] provide 2,000 educational presentations across New York City that reach almost 14,000 New Yorkers," Duke explains. "The peers are just incredible."

And Starks-Ross—who imparts her heart-wrenching personal connection to the AIDS Service Center (she lost her husband a decade ago to an AIDS-related illness) with strength and grace—puts it best: "I love the AIDS Service Center so much, and honestly, I truly believe in what we do. I tell people I'm a stakeholder. ... I have to be on this battlefield." Three cheers for the AIDS Service Center. —AE

AIDS Service Center 20th Anniversary Gala will be held on Nov 7 at Bryant Park Grill, 25 W 40th St (btwn Fifth/Sixth Aves), 6pm; \$500. Visit ASCHNYC.org for more info.

(right) Sharen Duke; (below) AIDS Service Center members at the SWAG Royal Flush BBQ earlier this year.

