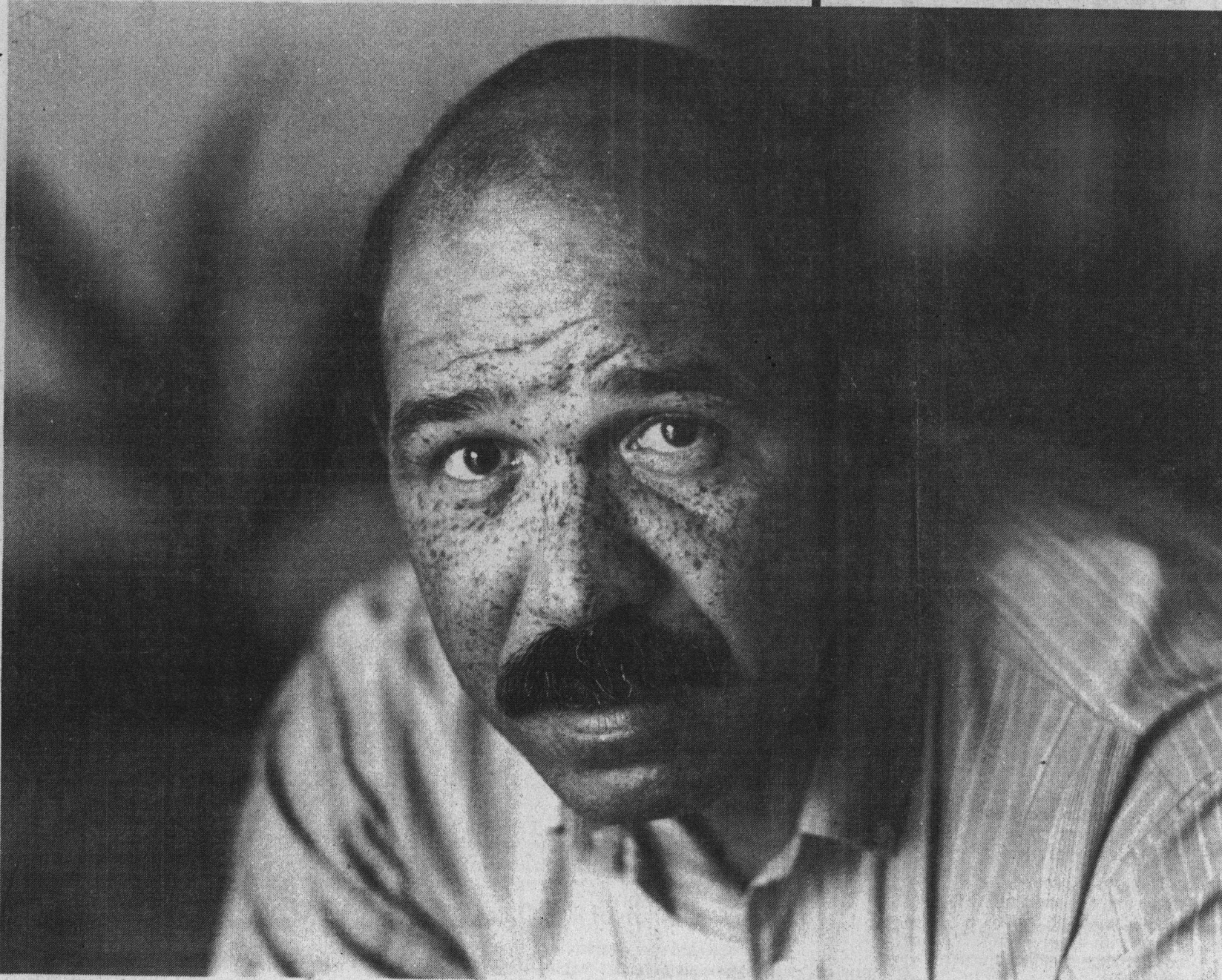
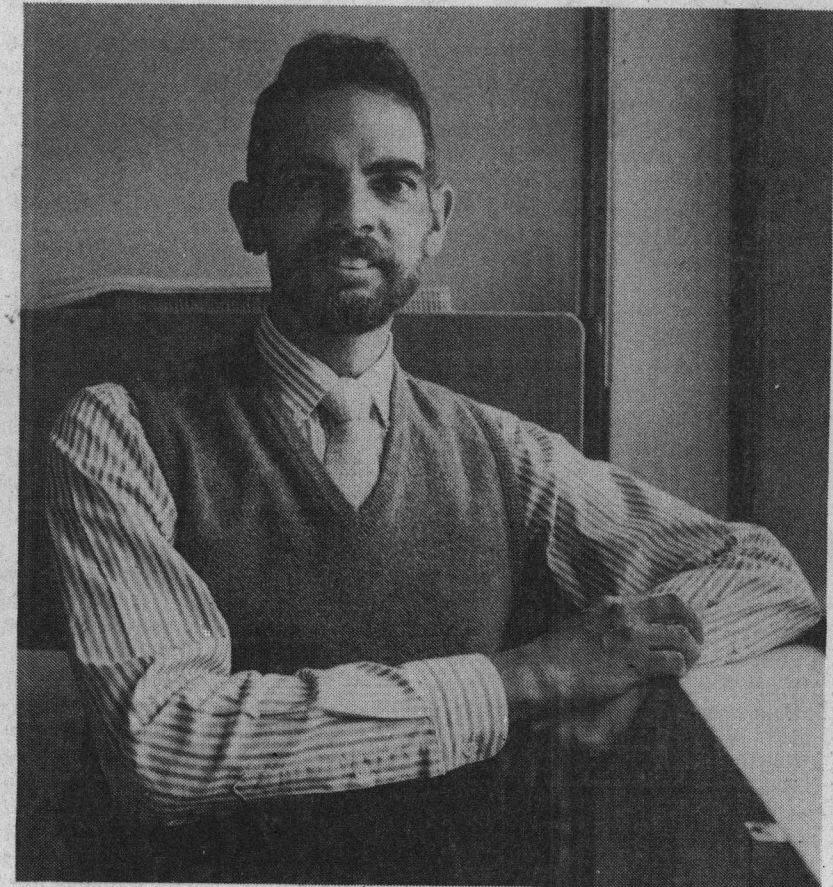


Home is where the help is for local victims of AIDS



Dan Coyro/Sentinel



Wesley Harris, left, who counsels victims, says, 'AIDS is a long illness of many months and a lot of friends don't stay around. And the demand put upon the friends is really great.' Gerald Landers, above, who coordinates the AIDS Project, comments, 'I have had several friends in the recent past who have been persons with AIDS or ARC and I've seen the devastation this particular disease process can bring on a person's life. I wanted to do something.'

Santa Cruz AIDS Project helps victims cope with certain death at a young age

By DENISE FRANKLIN
Sentinel Staff Writer

PEOPLE DIDN'T see or hear much about AIDS in Santa Cruz County for some time after the fatal virus was identified in 1983. There

four have died, according to Barbara Fleming, county senior communicable disease nurse. But Harris said those in the gay community know of many others, perhaps as many as 22. Some cases go unreported here because they are being treated elsewhere, he said.

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ant, Harris said, because not only do heterosexuals fear contact with those who have AIDS, but homosexuals shun AIDS and ARC sufferers. Fear runs high among the gay community because 72 percent of the victims have been homosexual.

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BARBARA Fleming, a senior public health nurse in charge of communicable diseases in the county Public Health Department, is proud of the local response. "They've done a great job with a couple of guys who have died. That says a lot for this county."

Santa Cruz AIDS Project helps victims cope with certain

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PEOPLE DIDN'T see or hear much about AIDS in Santa Cruz County for some time after the fatal virus was identified in 1983. There were victims here, but they were going to San Francisco for treatment. As their illnesses began to take hold and they became more seriously ill, they could no longer travel. The victims came home to die ... and no one was ready for them.

Then last spring the Santa Cruz AIDS Project was established and the community readied itself to help victims of acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

The project involves about 40 people. A hotline has been established, 458-4999, and there's an address to write to: P.O. Box 5142, Santa Cruz, 95063.

Licensed counselors like Wesley Harris of Aptos and Mary Orr are helping the victims cope with facing certain death at a young age. Those who've watched friends die, like Sean Wharton of Lompico, are volunteering to be companions to victims they've never even met. Professionals, like clinical psychiatrist Jerry Solomon, are organizing educational talks at local businesses. Santa Cruz City Councilman John Laird is on the board of directors and helps however he can.

Officially, seven county residents have been ravaged by the disease;

four have died, according to Barbara Fleming, county senior communicable disease nurse. But Harris said those in the gay community know of many others, perhaps as many as 22. Some cases go unreported here because they are being treated elsewhere, he said.

The virus is spread through the exchange of body fluids — through sexual intercourse, the use of dirty hypodermic needles, blood transfusions. It attacks the body's ability to fend off infections.

Many more, perhaps 100-200 individuals here, have been exposed and diagnosed as having AIDS-related complex or ARC. They are unsure when or if AIDS may strike.

Last spring, Harris, a licensed marriage, family and child counselor, was counseling several people who had AIDS or ARC. He realized these sick people lacked a support system and noticed the toll it was taking on their friends and families.

"I also became aware of the isolation they suffer since they didn't have the energy to keep themselves in a social environment ... to get themselves out of the house.

"That started some concern ... about what was going on in the community to help. Nothing was going on. I think it was just the lack of not expecting it to happen in Santa Cruz.

"I started calling around to Public Health ... to Jerry Solomon, a clinical psychiatrist and leader among the gay community. They had not responded because the numbers here were so low," Harris said.

The county Public Health Department soon met with members of the gay community, local hospitals and extended care facilities to plan for when AIDS cases began to increase here. As a result of that meeting, the Freedom Democratic Caucus, a local gay and lesbian group, met in April to determine its response. From that meeting, the Santa Cruz County AIDS Project was formed.

THE project is broken down into five components — administration, education, fund raising, professional counseling and companions. Gerald Landers, a department manager in admitting at Dominican Hospital, is project chairman. The project, however, has applied for non-profit status and isn't associated with any hospital.

"I have had several friends in the recent past who have been persons with AIDS or ARC and I've seen the devastation this particular disease process can bring on a person's life," Landers said. "I wanted to do something and I wanted to see that Santa Cruz County could provide the same kind of services that are provided in large urban areas like San Francisco and Los Angeles. A person with AIDS or ARC probably would feel a lot more comfortable being serviced at home than having to travel long distances."

One of the services provided in the victims' homes is companionship.

About 20 volunteers have been visiting victims, either to help with daily chores or to befriend them, said Wharton, a gay resident of Lompico who writes computer logic for a firm in the Santa Clara Valley.

During a time when Wharton took a leave from work, he became a companion to two victims.

"It (AIDS) is something that is hard to face alone," Wharton said. "You have so much facing you and the people close to you (that) you end up relating to them in a way that is sometimes stressful. Sometimes it is hard to talk to the people close to you ...

"The purpose of the companion program is to help you to think about what you have to face, what you have to think about. It is what the social scientists call 'active listening.'"

Saturday, volunteers will receive training with help from the Hospice Caring Project on working with the dying. One of the reasons for fund raising is to help pay for the cost of such training sessions, said Ray Martinez of Aptos, who is part of the fund-raising component. The project also conducted a workshop in July for professionals working with AIDS victims.

Companionship is vitally import-

ant, Harris said, because not only do heterosexuals fear contact with those who have AIDS, but homosexuals shun AIDS and ARC sufferers. Fear runs high among the gay community because 72 percent of the victims have been homosexual.

"This is a young crowd, in their 20s or 30s. Most haven't established strong, love relationships. Maybe they've had a relationship one or two years. What they are finding is the support person who they thought they'd have a long-term relationship with is leaving. They are being deserted.

"This is a long illness of many months and a lot of friends don't stay around. And the demand put upon the friends is really great. These people are bedridden, have to be totally taken care of. They are not sick enough for the hospital, but aren't ambulatory. They can't do shopping, clean their house or clothes, change their sheets ..."

Also, said Harris, they are very angry people who ask "Why me?" and who are angry at everyone else who doesn't have AIDS. "This adds to the isolation because friends are dumped on and don't want to come back."

He is heading a support group for sufferers of both AIDS and ARC. It will begin Sept. 9.

BARBARA Fleming, a senior public health nurse in charge of communicable diseases in the county Public Health Department, is proud of the local response. "They've done a great job with a couple of guys who have died. That says a lot for this county."

Those with the project have learned from similar groups in San Francisco and have passed on what they've learned to others in Monterey County, where another project has been started.

Not only homosexuals, but heterosexuals also are getting involved in the project. Their help is greatly needed, Harris said, because this area doesn't have a large gay professional base like San Francisco.

Some may wonder why those not greatly at risk would want to get involved. Perhaps they realize that AIDS is no longer a "gay disease."

"... From a public health standpoint, it is everybody's problem," said Fleming. "We have a lot of intravenous drug users in this county who share needles and it definitely is their problem ... and the sexual partners of any of these people, it is their problem. It is a problem for people who go to prostitutes and it is a problem for prostitutes. It is important for people to know it is going to be everybody's problem before it is over."