

Aids charity turns 20

LOCAL NEWS / Toronto PWA Foundation worries about future

Krishna Rau / Xtra / Thursday, December 20, 2007

The Toronto People With AIDS Foundation (TPWAF) turned 20 years old in 2007 and it's an anniversary which Murray Jose would prefer not to have to deal with.

"It's hard to know how to acknowledge it," says TPWAF's executive director. "You don't want to celebrate it. You'd much rather not be here."

TPWAF has been commemorating the anniversary with a series of speakers talking about the history of the organization and how it's helped those living with HIV and AIDS deal with such issues as medication, finances and psychological counselling. Jose, who has been the executive director at TPWAF for three years, has spent much of his recent time reviewing the history of the organization.

He says TPWAF began in 1987 when a group of HIV-positive gay men realized there was nowhere they could turn.

"There was a group of individuals living with HIV/AIDS and feeling frustrated at the lack of support," says Jose. "As has often been the case for those of us living with HIV and AIDS no one else seemed to know what to do."

Jose says that because 20 years ago AIDS was seen as a gay disease TPWAF initially received very little help from outside the queer community.

"Most of the fundraising was within the gay community," says Jose. "There was the Gay and Lesbian Appeal at the beginning.

"Initially it wouldn't have been possible to go out into the broader community at all. It's been pretty humbling to read some of these stories about how these individuals began the foundation."

But Jose worries that the combination of increasing criminalization around nondisclosure of HIV and cuts to federal government funding could return TPWAF to those early days.

"I think the current tendency to use the justice system as a tool for prevention is pretty backward and horrendous," he says. "It doesn't recognize any of the issues around how and why disclosure can be a problem. I think it's increasing stigma and discrimination."

Jose says the approach of the federal Tories to the disease is also worrying. In contrast to the Ontario government, whose funding Jose says has continued to increase slightly each year, the feds cut \$1 million in funding from the Ontario AIDS Community Action Program. Jose says TPWAF would have applied for funding for various projects from that money. TPWAF's operational funding has been renewed until March 2009 but the government won't say at what level.

But despite the current bad news, Jose says the 20th anniversary marks a lot of positive changes for TPWAF. He says the spread of the disease has brought a lot of communities together.

"When we're all working together it's pretty incredible," he says. "We can't be all things to all people but we try to be welcoming. Sometimes, for example, people from the African-

Caribbean community would rather get services here than risk running into a friend or neighbour."

TPWAF will be holding two more 20th anniversary events in January, including a discussion around future directions. The anniversary will conclude on Sun, Jan 20 with a play called Men Like Trees. There will also be the unveiling of The Legacy Project, an artwork featuring the pictures of those using TPWAF's services.

For more on the Toronto People With AIDS Foundation visit