

UTAC's Helen Miramontes: HIV/AIDS Warrior

by Maren Symonds

If we time-traveled 25 years in the past, we'd encounter a rising tide of anxiety. An unknown disease had claimed hundreds of lives in the gay community and beyond. Thousands more were snared by its deadly current. Prejudice and fear were spreading faster than the infection. But this dark cloud had an indomitable silver lining... and her name was Helen Miramontes.



The mother of six, Helen began her nursing career at Kaiser Permanente Santa Clara at the age of 41. She was working in the intensive care unit when the first AIDS patients arrived in 1983. At the time, the disease went undetected until it decimated the patient's immune system. While many of her co-workers responded with trepidation and inappropriate curiosity, Helen only saw fragile individuals who needed her considerable skill and compassion. She quickly became the hospital's "go to" person on AIDS.

During her tenure as President of the California Nurses Association, Helen developed and delivered HIV/AIDS training for the State's healthcare providers. She became increasingly active in the political arena to address discrimination by employers, landlords, healthcare providers, and insurance companies toward AIDS patients. In 1985, she traveled throughout the State to lobby against Proposition 64, a ballot initiative that attempted to treat AIDS as a disease subject to quarantine. It was defeated by a margin of 71% to 29%.

Helen's work found expression on the national stage as a trainer for the American Nurses Association, the newly formed AIDS Education and Training Centers (AETC), and the US Army community health nurses. The latter provided annual HIV/AIDS training for all army personnel. She helped the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) craft regulations consistent with guidelines from the Center for Disease Control (CDC). And she championed vaccine and microbicide development as a member of President Clinton's Council on AIDS.

Helen's crusade became personal in 1991 when her son, Jonathan, received the heartbreaking diagnosis. He opted to pursue aggressive treatment that eventually required a regimen of 93 pills per day. The side effects of the treatment often made him feel worse than the ravages of the disease. After a long and valiant battle, he passed in 2006 with family at his side.

Today, early detection and improved treatment protocols take *some* of the edge off the HIV/AIDS diagnosis. Nonetheless, the disease remains a formidable opponent. Anti-retroviral medications demand strict adherence, and a host of side effects still impact quality of life. Helen is concerned that the disease has receded too far from public consciousness.

"At the height of the pandemic, half of the gay people in San Francisco were infected. Three or four hundred people died every week," she recalls. "Today's young gay men were not alive in the early 1980s. They haven't experienced the devastation of the epidemic. They think that all they'll have to do is take a pill."

A recent announcement by the Global Solutions for Infectious Diseases (GSID) gives Helen cause for hope. A Phase III clinical trial of an investigational HIV vaccine regimen has been shown to be safe and partially effective in preventing HIV infection. GSID, one of three research organizations engaged in the study, received seed money from Until There's A Cure® Foundation where Helen serves on the Board of Directors.

Though officially retired since 2002, Helen continues to be active in support of AIDS vaccine development and HIV/AIDS training for health care providers. She remains indefatigable in her commitment to persons living with HIV/AIDS. Her passion goes beyond personal and professional associations with the pandemic. As she says: "We live in a web of interdependent communities. When any one of us suffers, we all suffer."

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Headquartered in Redwood City, CA, Until There's A Cure® Foundation is a national organization dedicated to AIDS awareness and prevention education, care and services for those living with AIDS, and vaccine development.