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A New Look at 25

This summer, the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) turns 25! In recognition of this milestone, ACT is launching a new agency logo and 25th anniversary campaign that kicks off during Pride Week and continues with a special community event on July 18.

“At ACT, we greet every anniversary with a mixture of optimism and frustration,” says Executive Director Lori Lucier. “Optimism, in the sense that we see more people with HIV/AIDS (PHAs) living longer and healthier lives than ever before, and frustration with the fact that HIV/AIDS is still here, that PHAs still deal with isolation and uncertainty, that people are still getting infected, and they’re still dying.”

Formed in 1983 by a group of community members, ACT was an early advocate for the rights of people living with, affected by, and at risk for HIV/AIDS, providing education and support services when there were few other options.

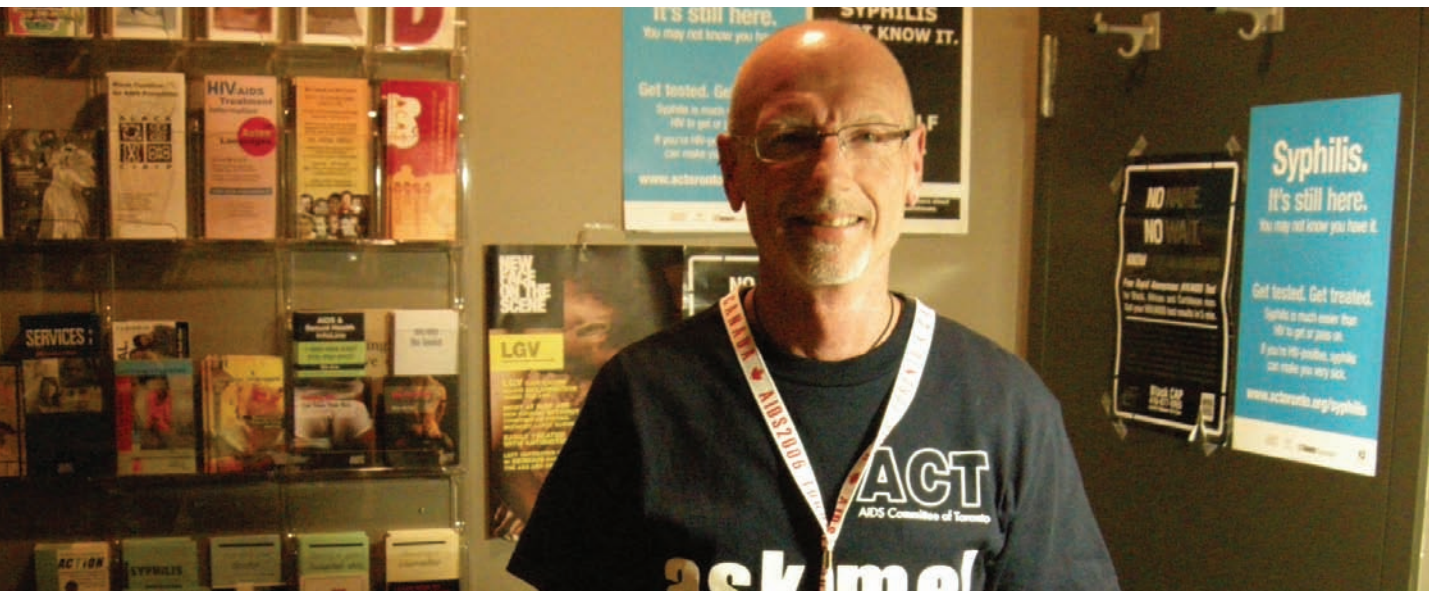
Twenty-five years on, our work is as important as it has ever been. As the epidemic has evolved, so has ACT. While HIV treatments have extended lives, living with HIV/AIDS is still fraught with uncertainty.

“Whether you’re coming into ACT to talk to someone because you’ve just tested HIV-positive, or you’re someone who feels isolated because your peers have passed away, or you’re thinking that you might want to return to work but don’t know what that may mean, ACT staff and volunteers help you make connections — to services, to people, to community,” says Lucier.

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Bathhouse Outreach

Friday, 10:30 p.m. Volunteer Steve Harrington is preparing for the 11 p.m. – 2 a.m. bathhouse outreach shift at Steamworks on Church Street. Steve has completed dozens of shifts over the past two years. As one of the more experienced volunteers in ACT's Bathhouse Outreach Program, he knows what to expect and yet, as he says, "every shift is different. I don't know who I will be speaking to tonight and that keeps it interesting."



Volunteer Steve Harrington at the baths

Since launching the Gay Men's Community Outreach program 15 years ago, ACT has made bathhouse outreach a top priority. Every month, program staff and volunteers provide an average of 45 hours of outreach to gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM) in Toronto.

"Bathhouses represent a unique venue for us to engage men in dialogue about sexual health and distribute safer sex materials at the same time," says Duncan MacLachlan, ACT's Gay Men's Outreach Coordinator. "We work hard to nurture relationships with the management of each establishment to ensure the best possible environment for our work."

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A team of highly trained volunteers form the cornerstone of the bathhouse outreach program. All of them receive ACT's mandatory Core Skills Training, and supplement their knowledge with outreach training and In-Service Training Workshops on harm reduction, conflict resolution and other topics. By the time volunteers begins their first shift, they have received more than 50 hours of training.

Most of their work takes the form of one-on-one conversations with bathhouse patrons. “We’ve found that the patrons feel less intimidated and are more likely to engage in conversations when they’re dealing with a single outreach volunteer,” says MacLachlan. “Solo shifts also extend the reach of the program.”

Over the past year, the program’s 15 volunteers talked to hundreds of men about sexual health, made 500 referrals, and distributed more than 26,000 condom and lube packs at five bathhouse locations in the city.

Bathhouse outreach volunteers also, vitally, help to track demographic shifts and other trends among gay and bisexual men. Through contact with bathhouse patrons, the volunteers gather feedback about attitudes towards sexual health, safer sex practices, and other issues.

After every shift, volunteers complete an outreach form. The data gathered from these forms is then incorporated into the Gay Men’s Community Outreach program.

“Recently, for example, we noted a significant increase in outreach to men of colour. In response, we have increased training on cultural competency and recruited more diversity to the team,” says MacLachlan. This data is also incorporated into the agency’s HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns.

We’ve found that the patrons feel less intimidated and are more likely to engage in conversations when they’re dealing with a single outreach volunteer.

“The safer oral sex campaign we launched last year was developed partly in response to the persistent questions bathhouse volunteers received about oral sex risk,” says Rui Pires, ACT’s Gay Men’s Community Education Coordinator. “This kind of information gathering is incredibly useful to the work we do.”

MacLachlan is quick to credit his team of volunteers for their contributions: “The best ideas come from the volunteers who deliver this program. It’s my job to turn their ideas into outreach tools.”

MacLachlan will present highlights from the Gay Men’s Community Outreach program at a special MSM-focused event at the 2008 International AIDS Conference in Mexico City.

ACT at AIDS 2008

This summer, ACT is not only attending the XVII International AIDS Conference in Mexico City — we’re bringing the conference to you!

From July 31 – Aug. 8, a team of ACT staff members will report from Mexico City on ACT’s AIDS 2008 Conference blog. You’ll want to check out www.actoronto.org/aids2008 for our daily reports about the latest developments in AIDS research, activism, community development, support services, education outreach and more from around the world. We’ll also bring you updates from our own abstract and poster presentations at the conference.

For more information, contact Tyler at tstiem@actoronto.org



ACT Staff Member to Join Canadian Commission for UNESCO Youth Advisory Group

ACT is proud to announce that Kate Murzin, one of our HIV Health Promotion Coordinators, has been invited to join UNESCO's 2008-10 Youth Advisory Group. Along with 80 other young people from across the country, Kate will sit on the Advisory Group's Canadian Commission, providing input to UNESCO on global issues.

UNESCO — the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization — is a specialized agency of the UN that “embodies a genuine culture of peace by promoting collaboration among nations through education, the sciences, culture, and communication and information.”

In keeping with the UN Millennium Development Goals, UNESCO has identified HIV/AIDS as one of its priority issues. Acting as an information broker, UNESCO promotes the exchange and transfer of knowledge between governments, civil society groups, researchers, and the public to improve HIV/AIDS research and education and promote human rights — including the right to gender- and culturally specific HIV/AIDS programming.

“I’m ecstatic,” says Kate. “I think it will be a tremendous learning experience.”

One example of UNESCO’s work in Canada includes the Associated Schools Project Network (ASPnet), a network of over 20 schools across the country where the curriculum and educational approach reflects the mandate and values of UNESCO. This program raises awareness among students about world issues and helps them develop the skills they need to be global citizens.



"Given ACT's already successful history of collaborating with local, national, and international organizations, I think it will be a great opportunity"

As part of the Canadian Commission, Kate will be called upon to provide input into the development of the National Commission's programme and budget for the coming years. These documents represent Canada's position with respect to UNESCO's programme priorities.

“Given ACT’s already long and successful history of collaborating with local, national, and international organizations on HIV/AIDS issues, I think it will be a great opportunity for the agency,” she says.

“In keeping with one of the Canadian Commission's primary mandates — consultation — I'd like to hear from the readers of this newsletter. If they have ideas on how we can achieve positive change for people living with, affected by, and at risk for HIV/AIDS in Canada or the world, I can bring them to the Youth Advisory Group and, by extension, the Canadian Commission as a whole.”

You can reach Kate at kmurzin@actoronto.org. For more information about the UN, UNESCO, or the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, visit www.un.org, www.unesco.org, and www.unesco.ca.

A New Look at 25

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ACT's programming has evolved into a continuum of care that includes practical, emotional, and vocational support services — such as food programs, counselling, support groups, and employment counselling.

And as new generations grow up with HIV/AIDS and new vulnerable communities emerge, our HIV prevention work has changed, too. Built upon a greater understanding of the many reasons behind HIV risk-taking, it is more sophisticated than ever before, yet remains rooted in community.

It was with our history and the continued urgency of our work in mind that we developed the new agency logo — you can see it in the masthead, and on this page — and 25th anniversary campaign. The logo was created by Compass 360, an advertising agency that generously donated their design expertise, and was focus-tested with ACT board members, staff, volunteers, and clients.

“What we like about the new logo is its bold simplicity,” says ACT Board co-Chair Karim Karsan. “In one elegant icon and three simple letters, it honors what ACT is about: compassion, progress, and solidarity.”

“There’s a nice, deliberate ambiguity to the icon,” says Lucier. “Some people read it as a stylized AIDS ribbon, or an arrow suggesting upward progress, and still others as a roof or two paths connecting. We think all of those interpretations speak to the reality of ACT’s work.”

The 25th Anniversary Campaign will run until next spring, with an exciting roster of events planned throughout the year, beginning with the anniversary community event.



act

Look for ACT at the Pride Day Celebrations on June 29 and join us for our community event at The Barn Nightclub (418 Church Street) on Friday, July 18 at 8 p.m. Admission is free (donations accepted) and there will be entertainment, as well as an ACT retrospective. We will also be announcing other upcoming 25th anniversary events on our soon-to-be relaunched website.

“As we look towards the future, we draw strength from our past,” says Lucier. “Strength in the knowledge that we’ve made a difference over the past 25 years. Strength in the knowledge that with the ongoing support of our volunteers donors, and communities we will continue to confront HIV/AIDS in Toronto with care and compassion until the day the epidemic is over.”

For more information, contact John Maxwell, ACT’s Director of Special Projects, at jmaxwell@actoronto.org.

If you plan on attending the July 18 event at the Barn, please RSVP to anniversary@actoronto.org.

Scotiabank AIDS Walk for Life: Sept. 14

Join us for the Scotiabank AIDS Walk for Life Toronto on Sunday, September 14! Thanks to the support of thousands of walkers, supporters, and corporate sponsors, last year's event raised over \$450,000 and 2008 is shaping up to be bigger and even better.

Back by popular demand is the Boogie Wonder Band, performing live on stage in our Beer Garden. So be sure to come in your best disco costume to walk the route, and then boogie the day away.

To register as a team or as an individual walker, please log on to www.aidswalkforlifetoronto.ca or contact Natasha at nward@acttoronto.org for more information.



2008 image by acclaimed Canadian HIV-Positive artist Morgan McConnell.



Volunteers Make Income Tax Clinic a Huge Success in 2008



Thanks to the dedication and expertise of our team of income tax volunteers, this year's Income Tax Clinic was a huge success, providing help to over 450 people living with HIV/AIDS.

"This was a record-breaking year for us," says Robin Rhodes, ACT's Health Promotion Coordinator. "I was positively thrilled to see so many clients achieve such good, stress-free results with their taxes."

The volunteer team worked with clients to figure out their taxes, which can be complicated by disability, spousal, and estate claims. When possible, they also helped them file their returns online to ensure speedy assessments.

The Income Tax Clinic received a commendation from Revenue Canada for its thoroughness and efficiency. Congratulations to Robin and his team!



Donor Profile: Team Jessica

Every year, Scotiabank AIDS Walk for Life Toronto raises hundreds of thousands of dollars for ACT's prevention education and support services, thanks in no small part to the teams that come together to walk. Many of these teams are driven by one or a few dedicated people who have been personally touched by HIV/AIDS. Team Jessica is one of these teams.

As her mother, Sandy, recalls, Jessica tested positive in late 2001, while studying at university in Montreal. The family at first reacted with shock, sorrow, and anger — and then with acceptance and action. At that point, "HIV not only became a part of Jesse but of her family and friends," Sandy says.

One of Jessica's cousins came up with the idea to participate in the AIDS Walk for Life Toronto as a way of showing the family's love and support for her. They registered a team and named it after her, recruited walkers, and collected pledges. "The Walk brought us together," Sandy says.

And together they came. Since first participating in the AIDS Walk for Life Toronto in 2002, Team Jessica has raised in excess of \$60,000 for ACT's programs and services for people living with and at risk for HIV/AIDS. Last year alone, Team Jessica raised \$15,270 — making them the Top Prize Winning Team — and was awarded for

their efforts at a ceremony at Toronto City Hall by Mayor David Miller.

Sandy is humble about the team's considerable accomplishments: "It's not how much you raise, it's about being there. The pledges and donations come naturally."

For Jessica, an HIV diagnosis hasn't slowed her down. Now living in Toronto, Jessica gets great joy as a hairdresser and has returned to school to study community work. She is very close with her younger sister, and regularly connects with her mother in Ajax. Married for almost three years, Jessica is considering having a child. And, throughout, Jessica has thankfully been healthy.

Every year at the AIDS Walk for Life Toronto, members of Team Jessica don blue T-shirts with a cluster of yellow stars. "Everybody is a star," Sandy says. Enough said.

Thank you, Team Jessica!



Employment Action Reaches 1000th Client Milestone

This May, another ACT program, Employment Action, reached a milestone: Our job counsellors served their 1000th client.

Established in September 1999 to help people living with HIV/AIDS (PHAs), Employment Action provides vocational training, employment counselling, and job placements.

Over the years, Employment Action has secured vocational training for over 400 clients, placed 350 in jobs, and provided advice and counsel to many more. Working one on one with clients, the Employment Action team helps them to upgrade their skills, polish their resumes, secure placements, and manage the stress of returning to work.

In 2007 alone, Employment Action counselled over 100 clients and placed 50 in jobs. Job Developer Don Phaneuf attributes the increased demand for services to advances in antiretroviral medications and to changes in the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).

“With better medications and more flexibility to work while maintaining some support from the ODSP, we’re seeing more and more PHAs who want to re-enter the workforce,” he says. “Our job is to help them develop a plan that suits their needs, whether they want to test the waters or start a new career.”

Employment Action has placed a diverse group of people into a wide variety of fields, including teaching, accounting, data entry, sales, customer service, nursing, computer programming, security, and customer service.

“Thanks to Employment Action, I’ve managed to secure two part-time jobs with community agencies here in Toronto,” says one client, a young man who recently immigrated to Canada. “I wouldn’t have made it without their help.”

Employment Action has secured vocation training for over 400 clients, placed 250 in jobs, and helped many more.

Another client, a single mom who now works as an office manager, had this to say about the program: “Getting steady employment meant I could afford to bring my daughter from Zimbabwe. I’m happy to say she’s now living with me in Canada.”

Phaneuf, for his part, is excited about the future of the program: “The way things have gone over the past couple of years and the first six months of 2008, I expect we’ll be reaching our 2000th client milestone sooner than anyone expected” he says.

For more information about Employment Action, email Don at dphaneuf@actoronto.org

The ACT Library Turns 20

ACT's 25th anniversary isn't the only milestone we're celebrating at the agency this year – our library is turning 20!

ACT has always collected and circulated HIV/AIDS-related books, periodicals and other resources to clients, researchers, and the public, but it was in December 1987 that the library was officially established with the hiring of the agency's first librarian.

“When the library was started, there was very little information about HIV/AIDS out there,” says ACT's current librarian, Erica Lee. “People living with HIV/AIDS (PHAs) were looking for anything they could find to make informed decisions about treatment and their health. The job of the library was, and continues to be, helping people to empower themselves with information.”

Over the years, the ACT library has grown to accommodate the vast amounts of HIV/AIDS information that has evolved over the years. Today, it is the largest publicly accessible HIV/AIDS library in North America, with holdings of over 7400 books, 1000 videos and DVDs, and many thousands of articles as well as online resources such as the HIV/AIDS Thesaurus and ASO411, a guide to HIV/AIDS-related services in Ontario.

“In particular, we've seen the rise of wellness and holistic health in HIV/AIDS care and treatment,” says Community Information Librarian Lily Mac. “This is something that has come from within the AIDS movement, from PHAs themselves. People are doing their own research, figuring out what works best for them, and from that a vital knowledge base has developed and continues to grow.”

ACT client and library volunteer Tony King remembers his own struggle to learn about his options: “When I tested positive I got informed and took charge of my health, as much as I could.” he says.

Tony recently received the ACT 10 Years of Service Award for his contributions to the library.

"The smartest thing I did was come to ACT and get informed."

Since its inception two decades ago, the library has benefitted from the contributions of countless dedicated volunteers like Tony as well as the direction and management of more than 10 librarians.

Join us this fall when the library holds a special open house to celebrate its 20 years. For more information contact Erica at elee@actoronto.org.

ACT librarian Erica Lee in the stacks.



The HIV/AIDS Community Calendar

ACT and its partners are proud to announce the launch of the HIV/AIDS Community Calendar, an online, cross-agency listing of wellness programs and events for people living with HIV/AIDS in the Greater Toronto Area. Check it out at www.actoronto.org/calendar. For more information, contact alopez@actoronto.org.

Second Issue of *Being Well* Out Now

Wondering how to eat well on a budget? Worried that your medications are affecting your appetite and digestion? Looking for information resources? The second issue of *Being Well: The PWA/ACT Wellness Newsletter* has answers to all of these questions. The theme of the current issue is nutrition for people living with HIV/AIDS. Check it out at the ACT and PWA offices or online at <http://www.actoronto.org/website/home.nsf/pages/wellnessnews>.

Interested in Becoming an ACT Volunteer?

If you're interested in volunteering at ACT, the first step is to attend one of our bi-monthly Volunteer Information Sessions. The sessions are an opportunity to learn about ACT's programs and services and find out what being an ACT volunteer entails. They are held the second Wednesday of every other month at the ACT offices (399 Church Street, second floor) and begin at 6 p.m. Check the ACT website at www.actoronto.org for more information.

Become a Member, Make a Difference



Can you imagine a world without HIV/AIDS? By becoming a member of ACT, you can help us work towards this goal. ACT's membership includes a diverse community of people throughout the Greater Toronto Area who actively support and share in our Vision, Mission, and Guiding Principles.

Members play an important role at ACT, choosing our Board of Directors at the annual general meeting (AGM) and providing valuable input that guides our work. Members receive a biannual newsletter, annual report, quarterly e-bulletins, AGM updates, and more.

In this, our 25th anniversary year, we invite you to support our work by joining or rejoining us as a member of ACT today. Memberships coincide with our fiscal year, April 1 – March 31, but you can join anytime. Complete the coupon on the back page and return it to ACT, or contact us at 416.340.8484, ext. 279 or membership@actoronto.org. Thank you for making a difference!

Volunteer Profile: Tony King

“I was diagnosed with HIV in 1996, and obviously that was a shattering experience at the time,” says Tony King.

“Probably the smartest thing I did for myself was to make a decision about what I was going to do about it. And the first thing I did was come and visit ACT.”

A recipient of ACT’s 10 Year Volunteer Service Award, Tony first came to the agency as a client.

“The doctors gave me six months, a year to live. And when you’re not feeling well, it’s very easy to stay home and do nothing and sink into a depression. I made a conscious decision to get out of the house and developed my ‘Staying Alive Project.’”

Tony enrolled in classes on food, nutrition, and exercise, and joined the YMCA’s Poz Group. As his health improved, little by little, he continued to access the agency’s services, but he also threw himself into volunteer work in the ACT library and at the Toronto People With AIDS Foundation.

“I was drawn to the library because it was such an important resource to me when I was first diagnosed,” Tony remembers. “As nice as my doctors were, their answers were either too scientific or too dumbed-down. I wanted to make informed decisions about my health, so I read everything I could get my hands on. Now I’m very happy when I can help other people to empower themselves this way.”



As Tony grew fitter and more confident — to the point that he now says “I’m 67 years old, and I think I’m doing well, for a person my age, HIV-positive or not” — he began to think about taking on a bigger role at ACT.

In 2004, he joined ACT’s Board of Directors. Today, he’s in the first year of his second term. He participated in the agency strategic planning process and sits on the board’s finance sub-committee.

“It’s been a real eyeopener. From this new vantage point, I’m seeing how ACT is a living, breathing organism that changes with its environment. My work with the board has made me appreciate the way ACT has evolved and continues evolve to serve what is now a really diverse group of people living with and at risk for HIV/AIDS in Toronto,” Tony says.

“I’ve come a long way over the past decade, and so has ACT.”

