

## Michael Goforth: Critters recruited in fight against AIDS

By Michael Goforth

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When Terri Ann Palumbo moved to this area, she was struck by what was not being talked about. Coming from Manhattan, she was puzzled that there was so little discussion about HIV and AIDS compared to what she had been used to.

“Somewhere along the line, we stopped paying attention,” she said. “I really didn’t hear people talking. There was a lack of conversation and a lack of information. But, we’ve got a big, huge problem here.”

She’s right. There are more than 2,130 people in St. Lucie, Martin, Indian River and Okeechobee counties — our neighbors — living with HIV/AIDS. In the black community of St. Lucie County, the rate of infections is at epidemic proportions and among the highest in Florida. But, it’s a serious health problem throughout the region among all races, sexes, incomes and ages. Consider, for example, that 62 cases of AIDS have been reported here among people ages 70 and over.

“I’ve had good friends who have died from HIV/AIDS,” Palumbo said. “I have friends living with it now. There isn’t one single person whose life isn’t affected by it, even though we may not know it.”

The first friend of mine who died from AIDS did so nearly a year before the disease had a name. When it did get a name, the disease seemed to be largely limited to gay men who frequented the bath houses in San Francisco and New York. The rest of us weren’t in danger. Or so we thought until we were proven so wrong.

A few years ago, Palumbo decided she wanted to do something to restore the conversation about AIDS and to help those suffering from the disease. That goal will be realized Nov. 14 with a benefit concert at the Sunrise Theatre in Fort Pierce with 100 percent of the proceeds going to the AIDS Research and Treatment Center of the Treasure Coast.

Founded in 1995 in Fort Pierce by Dr. Gerald Pierone, the nonprofit clinic provides medical care to persons with HIV and AIDS, access to food, clothing, transportation, patient/family support groups and nutrition counseling in the four-county region. It regularly sees more than 500 clients.

“We see people when prevention has failed,” Pierone said. “It’s frustrating, challenging, and I have no easy answers.”

The upcoming concert, he said, "is a huge event for us," by raising awareness about the AIDS situation on the Treasure Coast and the work of the clinic and by providing it with much-needed revenue.

"Federal funding has been flat for the last eight years," he said. "We're in a real cash crunch. Basically, we're having to make do with an increasing number of patients."

The goal of the concert is to raise \$30,000.

Palumbo, executive aide to St. Lucie County Commissioner Chris Dzadovsky, who has made AIDS education one of his priorities, had some considerable help in arranging the concert through her husband, Don Ciccone, a songwriter and performer who was lead singer for The Critters, was one of the Four Seasons with Frankie Valli, and sang with Tommy James and the Shondells.

The Nov. 14 concert will kick off with Ciccone and The Critters, whose hit songs include "Younger Girl," and the classic written by Ciccone, "Mr. Dyingly Sad." They'll also perform Four Seasons hits such as "December '63 (Oh, What a Night)" on which Ciccone sang lead vocals.

Following them will be the legendary Tommy James and the Shondells with hits such as "Crimson and Clover" and "Crystal Blue Persuasion."

Lead sponsor of the event is John Pierson's Toyota of Stuart.

"He was able to take the broad view that this little clinic is taking care of people all over the Treasure Coast," Palumbo said of Pierson. "He's really becoming a champion for this issue."

The upcoming concert is not the conclusion of Palumbo's dedication to the HIV and AIDS problem.

"I'm so happy to be finally able to do this," she said. "It's a start and we're going to do it every year."

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