

# Living To Tell Our Stories: Minnesotans and HIV/AIDS

Born in California, Hazel moved with her parents and three siblings to Minnesota when she was five years old. No stranger to adversity, Hazel learned of her HIV diagnosis in 1996, only nine months after her only daughter died of cancer at the age of thirty-five. Hazel's only other child, a son, died at birth. As an adult, she returned to California and it was there she learned she was HIV positive. Her first response was, "I am going to die and be with my daughter." She adds, "I just knew that people who had AIDS were going to die. That's all I knew about it." However, it did not take her long to begin the process of *living* with HIV.

Hazel moved to New Mexico and immersed herself in a self-educational process that led her to the services of a local AIDS service organization and health care at the University of New Mexico. She utilized the services offered and became the poster child for the agency, recording radio and TV public service announcements.

In the fall of 2001, Hazel's aging mother had open heart surgery. The day before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Hazel returned to northwestern Minnesota to help care for her ailing mother. She found that rural Minnesota was a world away from the information and care she received in New Mexico. Her path to care started at a local county health department where she found limited knowledge and even less conversation

about HIV disease. After an uncomfortable experience with a rural physician, she discovered there was at least one other person living with HIV disease in her mother's small community and she eventually made contact with him. This ultimately resulted in her discovery of Ryan White services available in greater Minnesota.



Since that time, Hazel has received assistance with medical care, support groups, medical transportation, nutritional services, medication, and mental health services. She is appreciative of the services made available by Ryan White funding because it helps her pay for care that she could never afford. "Honestly, I would probably be homeless without assistance from Ryan White services." In addition to living with HIV disease, this past year Hazel had spinal surgery and suffered a heart attack.

As in New Mexico, she quickly became an advocate for all Minnesotans living with HIV disease. She is a member of the Minnesota HIV Services Planning Council and currently serves as co-chair. Because of her active involvement with the Planning Council, her two grandchildren who reside in the metro area, and her primary care physician in the Cities, Hazel plans on moving to Minneapolis in the near future. She believes God puts her in places that "need some stirring up." Her philosophy is simple: "If you need something, ask for it. Be your own advocate. Do not be afraid to ask." Hazel considers herself an instigator, the mouth that roars. To those who know her, she is a voice for the HIV positive community in Minnesota!