

Marin Independent Journal

Ex-resident pledges to continue battle against AIDS

By Beth Ashley

This morning's AIDS Walk in San Francisco promises to be a great day—a 6.2-mile stroll through Golden Gate Park with 25,000 of the “sweetest, nicest, most caring people you could ever hope to spend time with,” says Craig Miller, who organized the event.

Miller, 46, is at the top of the heap when it comes to AIDS walks. In 21 years, he has organized dozens of them—in San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York—and raised \$300 million nationwide for people with HIV.

“I can't think of a better way to have spent 21 years,” says Miller, a quiet man with a helmet of dark hair, slate-blue eyes and a gift for self-expression.

In his funky office in downtown San Francisco—“we don't spend any of the proceeds on office furniture”—he describes the journey that took him from his life as a 16-year-old student at College of Marin to being the go-to person for AIDS organizations in need of money.

He came to Marin at 16 from his childhood home in the San Fernando Valley, drawn by the beauty he saw on childhood camping trips here and by the allure of the Renaissance Pleasure Faire, which drew huge crowds every year at Black Point.

He got a job at the fair, where he



worked for two years, and lived in a tent in a meadow nearby.

He also enrolled at College of Marin and the Indian Valley campus, which he remembers now as “an absolutely beautiful” campus. “I studied college texts by lantern in my tent.”

When he had saved enough money, he moved into an apartment off Rowland Boulevard in Novato.

He had been interested in politics since age 13 and volunteered in George McGovern's 1972 presidential campaign.

In 1978, San Francisco Supervisor Dan White shot and killed Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk. “That was a life-changing experience, incredibly shocking, and the subsequent trial really opened my eyes to issues of how we value life and how society attaches different values to different people's lives.” Miller attended a candlelight vigil for the dead at San Francisco City Hall. The sentence White received—seven years in prison—was “at odds with anything that resembled equity,” he remembers.

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At the time, "I began to realize I was gay. The murders were traumatic enough, and coming to grips with being gay is never a piece of cake. Experiencing those two things simultaneously added a certain degree of gloom and doom and a lack of optimism about my own future."

On top of all that came news of "a gay cancer, some kind of deadly epidemic among gay people."

The news was traumatic for Miller. "Throughout the '80s, I assumed I would die of this disease. That was not an unusual assumption among those of us who came of age at that time. And many of us were right."

Miller took his gloom with him when he left Marin to move back to the San Fernando Valley where a friend was running for Assembly and asked for his help.

The political bug bit him during that campaign—"my friend won the primary and very narrowly lost the general election"—and Miller spent the next several years working for progressive politicians in the area, notably veteran Rep. Anthony Beilenson of Woodland Hills.

Beilenson, he says, was "wonderful" on the AIDS issue, unlike then-President Ronald Reagan, who from 1980 to 1987 never mentioned the word AIDS. "Gay people were not exactly part of his constituency."

Miller says the Reagan years were a missed opportunity to curtail the spread of HIV.

When Reagan didn't act, Miller was angry. "Very angry. I took it personally, and I believe that's exactly how it should have been taken."

He saw two alternatives—to complain or take action.

He decided to organize the first AIDS Walk, calling on event-organizing skills he had learned at the Renaissance Faire and in years of

political campaigns.

He and a business partner, Richard Zeichik, staged the first AIDS Walk in Los Angeles in July 1985. Miller took his cue from March of Dimes walks in the 1930s that raised money to fight polio.

"We could have had a fund-raising dinner or an art auction, but it was my idea to have an AIDS Walk. A walk would raise money to help a lot of people, and it would take a public stand in support of those who were struggling with the disease."

He also knew that if large numbers marched, they would send a signal to politicians that "their constituents cared about this issue, and they better get off the dime and do something."

The first AIDS walk drew 4,500 people and raised \$673,000.

Within days, a key AIDS organization in New York City invited him to stage a similar walk, which took place in May 1986, with 6,000 walkers raising \$710,000.

The San Francisco AIDS Foundation called next and, in July 1987, the first S.F. AIDS walk was held.

Held annually ever since, the San Francisco event has raised \$55 million to date.

"We didn't set out to have an organization to produce AIDS walks," Miller says, but as the demand grew, he and Zeichik formed their own business, MZA, now the foremost organization in the country raising money for AIDS. Miller lives in Santa Monica, but spends time in MZA offices in the Bay Area, Los Angeles and New York. His office—Zeichik left the firm 10 years ago—has organized walks in Chicago, Boston, Atlanta and, most recently Fort Lauderdale, and also raises money for other causes, including breast cancer and literacy.

Miller still has ties to Marin: His

brother Bradley Miller lives in Marinwood and heads the Humane Farming Association, educating the public on how animals in this country are raised for food.

"It's interesting," says Bradley's wife, Bonnie, "that two brothers have started nonprofit organizations that make a big difference nationally."

Bonnie says Craig has been a major influence on her son Dylan, 18, "who sees his uncle focusing his life on helping people."

Craig Miller says the first AIDS Walks drew support almost exclusively from gays and lesbians. "We worked very hard to gain support from everyone else. We are a much bigger tent now, a very big tent."

"This is not a case of them and us, and I'm only interested in the 'big us.' I didn't start the AIDS Walks just to help gay people. I started the walks to help people, period."

Money from today's walk—which starts at 10 a.m. in Sharon Meadows and will continue all day with entertainment and a huge picnic—will go to the S.F. AIDS Foundation. Earlier monies went to support a needle-exchange program so successful, Miller says, that pediatric AIDS in San Francisco has been dramatically reduced.

Andy Fine, volunteer coordinator at the Marin AIDS Project, says the AIDS Walk has been a boon locally because it raises awareness about the need for education, treatment and money. Marin AIDS Project gets a slice of the walk's proceeds, most of which help fund needle exchange.

Miller continues to feel that the AIDS epidemic is "under-addressed," and intends to continue the battle against it.

"I can't think of anything I could be doing more useful than this."