

Walk to honor THP's 'guardian angel'

WANT TO GO?

What: The 20th Annual Winter Walk

When: 1 p.m. on Dec. 4

Where: War Memorial Stadium, 501 Yanceyville St.

Information: To register for the walk or make a donation, go to www.winterwalkforAIDS.kinter.a.org. For more information, call THP at 275-1654.

Walk

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for Triad Health Project, which was then a fledgling AIDS support organization run out of a closet. With her staff behind her, she sponsored a Cut-A-Thon that raised \$7,000 — the most substantial sum the group had raised to date. But more than money, Ms. Leon gave the organization legitimacy.

"Without her support and involvement, we very well could have folded," says Johnny McGee, one of THP's founders. "There was another organization that started in Winston-Salem around the same time, and they didn't make it."

Today THP is a non-profit agency affiliated with the United Way that has a staff of nearly 20 and a volunteer base that numbers more than 500. It serves about 500 clients a year on a \$1.3 million budget. It marks its 25th anniversary this year.

The Winter Walk, which has become one of the group's signature fundraisers, this year marks its 20th anniversary, and honors Aileen Oldham for being one of the organization's first benefactors.

For Parker Washburn, who is helping sponsor the walk this year in her mother's honor, it has been a bittersweet experience.

■ **Aileen Oldham stood front and center in the fight against AIDS when others preferred to remain in the shadows.**

By **SUSAN LADD**
Staff Writer

GREENSBORO — To Aileen Oldham, it didn't matter how people looked or how they lived or whom they loved. It mattered that they were getting sick and dying — in

"I have these memories of very horrible, trying and sad times," she says. "But also, I have these wonderful memories of my mother. I miss her every day, but this has brought back so many memories of her."

Washburn says the first time they heard of AIDS was around 1985, when a former graduate of Leon's Beauty School came home sick from New York, where he had been living and working. "They called it cancer, but at the funeral we heard people say he had 'the gay disease.' It was the first time we heard that term. From then on, it was a tsunami."

AIDS first devastated the gay community, which had a fairly large population of hairdressers. Washburn estimates that over the next 10 years, they lost more than 30 graduates, employees and friends. Her mom was quick to respond.

"She became some kind of general," Washburn says. "We were told what to do and we did it."

Those who got sick were cared for — food, housing, transportation — whatever it took.

"The memory of being in those rooms, the devastation of the body, watching these young, healthy, good-looking young men, devastated by this disease ... I probably would never had released those memories again," Washburn says,

her eyes brimming with tears. "The first person I sat with who died ... had gotten sick, was diagnosed with full-blown AIDS, and died two weeks later."

Later, she would think he was one of the lucky ones, because she watched so many others linger and suffer, not just from the disease, but from the often hysterical reactions to it from family, friends and strangers.

That's one reason Oldham's public support meant so much.

"It helped us gain respectability in the Triad," McGee says. "From her example, more people in the straight community saw the need to get involved."

Ron Johnson, who was Oldham's attorney and was also involved with THP, recalls going with her to call on other businesses for support.

"People would say, 'We can't afford to be involved; it's too controversial.' 'She'd say, 'You can't afford not to be involved. This is going to be a worldwide epidemic, and we've got to be out there in the forefront.'"

Those who contributed often gave cash because they didn't want their names on a check to THP. By contrast, Johnson says, Oldham put Cut-A-Thon posters in every Leon's salon, where the creme de la creme of Greensboro came to get their hair cut. She

alarming numbers.

The year was 1987. The disease was AIDS. Misinformation was everywhere and fear of the disease was rampant. Sufferers often found themselves locked out of their apartments. Customers fled any business at the hint that an employee might be infected.

The woman known as Ms. Leon, for her beauty school and chain of hair salons, was one of the first businesspeople to raise money

with an infectious disease," Washburn recalls. "And remember, at the time, we really didn't know how (HIV) was transmitted."

"So we're heading back from her appointment at Duke, and she tells me we need to stop and see (a friend with AIDS) on the way home. I said, 'Mother, didn't they just tell you NOT to be around anyone with an infectious disease?'"

"She said, 'Parker, the way you're driving, I have a better chance of dying on I-40.'"

Because of her own illness, she was in tune with the treatment and the fear that AIDS patients felt. "When she learned what she'd die from, she started taking risks," Washburn says. "In a way, it was a gift. It gave her more courage than the rest of us, and she gave the rest of us more courage than we would have had otherwise."

Today, advances in drug therapy have dramatically improved outcomes for people with HIV. But that is a mixed blessing. Although people with HIV/AIDS are able to live active, productive lives for decades longer than before, there is now complacency where there used to be crisis.

"The younger generation thinks they have nothing to worry about," Washburn says. "The profile of AIDS has changed, but the disease hasn't."

"They typically told her not to be around anybody



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Leon's Beauty School owner Parker Washburn with a photo of her mother, Aileen Oldham, who was one of the first businesspeople to raise money for Triad Health Project.

H. SCOTT HOFFMANN
News & Record



Washburn's mother, Aileen Oldham, in a photo taken in Greensboro during the late 1980s.

HAIRCARE '87

A BENEFIT TO CUT OUT AIDS

OCTOBER 17, 1987 9AM - 6PM
FRIENDLY SHOPPING CENTER PARKING LOT
ALL HAIRCUTS \$10 T-SHIRTS \$5

THE WINTER WALK TO RAISE MONEY FOR THE TRIAD HEALTH PROJECT IS A BENEFIT TO CUT OUT AIDS. ALL HAIRCUTS \$10. T-SHIRTS \$5. ALL PROCEEDS GO TO THE WINTER WALK TO RAISE MONEY FOR THE TRIAD HEALTH PROJECT.

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PHOTOS BY H. SCOTT HOFFMANN
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