



This picture of Vera and I was taken at Camp Getaway in 1998. Vera and David presented a workshop that I facilitated at the NCAN conference around that same time. I feel sad at Vera's death but know that her legacy will go on in the many that she touched. Her daughter is considering coming to the conference this summer as part of the college leaders' pilot program.

VERA RODRIGUEZ, 47

Woman with HIV worked to aid others with disease

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To a less-sturdy personality, growing up poor in Chicago, having a child as a high school junior, falling into heroin addiction and finally contracting HIV might have crushed Vera Rodriguez.

Instead, that final test when HIV was diagnosed in 1991 was what spurred Mrs. Rodriguez to take control of her life. She became an outspoken, tireless advocate and along with her late second husband, who also had HIV, one of the first public heterosexual faces of HIV and AIDS.

"She always said HIV was a wakeup call for her and that she began

to live life after her diagnosis," said Dan Lunney, executive director of the National Catholic AIDS Network, who worked with Mrs. Rodriguez in the late 1990s. "Vera's legacy is to come out of adversity and respond with life. It's a tremendous gift."

Mrs. Rodriguez, 47, of Chicago died Wednesday, Feb. 25, in St. Joseph Hospital in Chicago. Her family said she died of lung failure, and the role HIV played in her death was not clear.

Both she and her second husband, David, who also was a drug addict, learned they had HIV at the same time.

Acceptance and advocacy were not her immediate reaction.

"In the very beginning, she was in absolute denial," said her daughter, Natalie Figueroa. "But when she accepted it, she decided to make something positive out of it."

Mrs. Rodriguez not only pulled herself up but did so for her husband as well. They began helping out the same groups they went to for help, not only offering themselves up as educational speakers but volunteering to assist others with HIV and AIDS.

"I think she brought alive what it is to live with AIDS, what it's like to take 50 pills a day and live with all the side effects," said Judy Perloff, the program director for Chicago House, a residential home for families with HIV and AIDS.

Perloff accompanied Mrs. Rodriguez to Washington four years ago to give a speech to federal officials. "People felt touched by her story," Perloff said.

Mrs. Rodriguez also made direct outreaches. Six years ago she adopted the son of one of her Chicago House neighbors, who had died of complications from AIDS.

Her and her husband's most important contribution, local activists say, was making public appearances and

willingly opening their lives up to reporters to show that anyone could contract HIV and AIDS.

"I think in the general public, there's still this mistaken belief that it's a gay male disease," said Lunney, who was working at the AIDS Pastoral Care Network when he first met Mrs. Rodriguez in 1995. "She and David showed there's a lot of diversity in AIDS."

Mrs. Rodriguez was born Vera Christine Murphy and grew up on the North Side. Her father was a laborer, and her mother cared for the six children.

Her children say her first husband, the father of her four biological children, frequently left Mrs. Rodriguez to fend for herself with public aid and a variety of jobs, mostly in local retail shops.

Energetic and standing 5 feet 7 inches tall, with short red hair, Mrs. Rodriguez "was a spitfire," said her son, Billy Figueroa.

"She was raised in the streets of Chicago, worked in the streets of the city, and she wasn't a stranger to anything," he said. "She was a tough woman."

Other survivors include two more sons, Anthony and Gerardo Figueroa; her adopted son Kenny Arceri; two brothers, William and Elmer Murphy; two sisters, Katheryn Vallas and Mary Dykus; and two grandchildren.

Mass will be said at 10 a.m. Monday in Queen of Angels Catholic Church, 4412 North Western Ave., Chicago.

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