Health crisis unifies Baton Rouge homosexual community

By KATHLEEN DONAHUE

The closet door that once represented restraint now symbolizes security for many Baton Rouge male homosexuals.

The day they retreated behind that door because of the atmosphere of fear generated by AIDS—secretly and defiantly—had already been recognized as a "homophobia," which makes gay men and lesbians reluctant to acknowledge their sexuality, he said.

The AIDS crisis has unified Baton Rouge's homosexual community.

"It has pulled us together, but it has set us back in our ability to live a more open lifestyle in our community and in our workplaces," said Gayle LaMantia, a local human services worker and member of MCC.

According to state Department of Health and Human Resources statistics, 141 Louisianaans have contracted AIDS.

By KATHLEEN DONAHUE

Advocate staff writer

Steve clapped his hands together and leaned forward, intent on recovering the memories of how he was once before contracting AIDS.

The thoughts flitted, he told, and he fell back into the cushioned chair and raised his arms in a gesture of hopelessness.

His feet throbbed. A cough raked his body.

But a threat threatened to blare full volume in his head.

Occasionally, Steve is granted a reprieve from the nagging pains. Other times, he's not.

Steve shrugged in resignation and almost sobbed, the sore feet that forced him to walk stiffly, like an old man.

Actually, it's been one of his best days, he said, smiling weakly.

The death sentence of his disease has confined the vibrant 25-year-old man to a life of loneliness, depression.

The unknown, the endless waiting, he said, are the most taxing penalties of the disease.

"Right now, whatever is wrong with me, I just kind of live with it. I don't know what is going to happen, if I can find something to make me better or if it is going to get worse, I take it from day to day," Steve said.

He keeps his visits of medicine in a small black plastic bag and takes 11 pills a day.

Steve and his mate, Michael, believe those pills somehow manage to keep his condition stable.

But none of those pills can rid him of his exhaustion although he sleeps almost eight hours and spends the remainder watching monotonic soap operas, he said.

Since he was diagnosed in March as having AIDS, he has developed anemia, which leaves him with a low number of white blood cells.

Steve said he feels weak and drained by his illness.

He appears gaunt, but not emaciated. His skin is pale and his cheeks are more pronounced. His many gestures reflect energy although he moves about gingerly.

Michael considers it a blessing that Steve has not worsened and faded quickly like so many other victims.

Death seems remote, but both say they accept it as the inevitable.

Steve said he was promiscuous, frequently indulging in sex with strangers. For him, it was a way to feel normal, to feel alive. The consequence of his carelessness was AIDS.

Before two years ago, he had been diagnosed in Baton Rouge, and Steve finally found care that was acceptable, he said. He had worked hard at his job, and after eight months after he was hired, he was given a promotion and sent to Baton Rouge to open an office here for the company.

"Here I am, and I don't even have a college degree," Steve said, thrumming back his hair.

As of Aug. 12, 1985

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Chart shows the parishes where AIDS cases have been reported.

I don't want to die...

Exhaustion and boredom are life for AIDS victims.

Editor's note: The names of individuals in this article have been changed at their request.

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One month after moving to Baton Rouge, he met Michael at a downtown bar.

"Love, not sex, binds the couple," Steve said. They have abstained from intercourse since Steve was diagnosed as having AIDS in March, Michael said.

Michael said he is concerned, but not alerted. They may contract AIDS.

"If I was afraid, I would probably run from Steve even knowing I couldn't catch it from him," he said.

Each month, Michael takes Steve to Octavus Foundation Hospital in New Orleans for his check-up. When Steve has been hospitalized, Michael spent days working here and then rushed over to New Orleans at night to sit at Steve's bedside.

"Yes, Michael, who is 38, doesn't run sometimes mystifies Steve. "I'm really proud of him. There are times he's irritable. He won't talk about it. There are times I'm not feeling well, and he has to do a lot," Steve said.

The couple admits it isn't easy. They are a lot of things. I like to be able to do, but I forsake them," Michael said.

Steve sometimes wonders if it isn't best to commit suicide and curtail the hurt suffering of the two.

"If I think about it more in the past year, the thought of living is not appealing. I don't want to be here," he said. "I don't plan to commit suicide. I don't think it's right. I don't have a reason to do that."

Steve recalled the time in April when he observed a man in a bluish grey coat sleeping under a bus stop. He called a friend to ask about the man, and the friend told him that the man was suffering a mental breakdown.

Steve was alarmed by the situation and immediately called the police, who arrived and removed the man from the area.

Steve said he is proud to live in a city where he and his partner are accepted and respected.

"One of the things I want when I was growing up was to be accepted," he said. "It's hard to imagine that."