

Mercy From a Broken Heart

People ran Betty Rushford out of town when her son got AIDS. But before his death, God called her to take Christ's love to victims of the disease.

Most people don't sign up for the emotional roller coaster that a slow, painful death brings. But Betty Rushford isn't ordinary. For the last 14 years the founder of Channels of Love ministry in Chattanooga, Tennessee, has helped AIDS sufferers look death in the face and emerge victorious.

Like those she ministers to, Rushford has learned from experience how to find hope in the midst of hopelessness. Since her own son tested positive for HIV, she has had to combat heartache, criticism, and financial and physical testing to serve AIDS patients and their families.

Along the way, she has helped mitigate the fear and misunderstanding about AIDS that has paralyzed the church for nearly two decades, crippling its response to the disease at home and around the world.

But if Rushford is a crusader, it's not because she wanted to be. Her story began in Kentucky in 1986 when her youngest son, Dino, was diagnosed with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Contracted through homosexual interaction, Dino's illness forced Rushford to face every phobia and prejudice she carried about what was then believed to be a gay disease.

"I knew nothing about the gay lifestyle. It never crossed my mind that God loved them," she said in *Mercy Triumphs*, her autobiography about their ordeal.

Fear of the disease, rampant at a time when AIDS was just getting national attention, led members of Rushford's community to drive her family out of their hometown. The Rushfords landed in Chattanooga, struggling with the effect of AIDS on their lives and the financial loss of the move.

Yet in this lonely time, Rushford believed her son's imminent death would not be in vain. She says God told her He had purposed for her to show His love to others in their position. Though terrified of being rejected again, Rushford launched Channels of Love with the support of her local congregation—City Church of Chattanooga—to share Christ's love with those living with AIDS.

The ministry provided counseling and support-group meetings, hot meals, financial assistance and more. But Rushford said she found the greatest and most demanding need was helping the dying face eternity. The disease became fatal much more quickly in the late-1980s and early 1990s when AIDS drugs were not as effective.

"Every week people were dying," Rushford remembers. "The main thing was to get them saved first and then help them make that transition."

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS, kills by gradually weakening the immune system until the body can no longer defend itself. As the virus runs its course, family and friends must watch their loved one endure a mounting wave of painful symptoms. Rushford exhausted herself sitting up night after night with many of her clients who lay dying.

Two of her early clients know firsthand the toll that caring

for a loved one with AIDS can take. Mary* from Soddy Daisy, Tennessee, was diagnosed with full-blown AIDS in 1992 after the death of her husband, from whom she contracted HIV. Her son Benu*, also HIV-positive, became gravely ill after trying to single-handedly care for his weakening mother. Yet Rushford and Channels of Love were there to help.

"There were many times that I called Betty for prayer, and she never once told me no," Mary says with tears in her eyes. "And there were many times when I ... couldn't have made it without her to pray with me and give me that extra little knot in the end of my rope."

Benu, a gay 33-year-old who is not a Christian, adds: "I believe in love as the strongest power in the universe, and that's what anyone who would come to this ministry can expect to find: love. They don't judge me for not believing as they do."

Mary and Benu, along with countless other AIDS victims, have benefited greatly from new, more effective drugs. "Cocktails," or daily doses of multiple medications, are helping AIDS patients live longer, but these medications were not available in time to save Dino.

Rushford lost her youngest son in 1998 when he was 33. At that time she turned Channels of Love over to The Salvation Army and spent several years recovering.

After holding up the arms of so many for so long, she felt weary and ready to pass the torch. "But the Lord didn't want that," she says now.

In 2002, she says, God began to speak to her again about helping those suffering from this epidemic killer. On a missions trip to Kenya that July, Rushford saw the disastrous effect of AIDS on the country, which has been termed “a disaster area” by its government. “The Lord birthed [the idea] into my spirit of going into the countries and helping the pastors there,” Rushford says.

Having helped ease the suffering of AIDS victims in her own country, Rushford set out to serve overseas. Her first outreach took her back to Kenya, to the Siaya Future Life Christian Ministries, pastored by Isaac Obure. Obure and his wife, a Kenyan AIDS counselor, wanted to help educate their church about how AIDS spreads and how they could lovingly respond to the sick.

Because many Christians there believe the disease is God’s judgment for fornication, they isolate themselves from anyone who contracts HIV-AIDS. Yet members of Obure’s own family and many of his parishioners are falling ill. Much of the tragedy stems from a tribal ritual in the area.

If a woman’s husband dies, she must be “inherited,” meaning that “somebody has to ‘cleanse’ you sexually before you are accepted back into the community,” Obure explains. “It doesn’t matter if your husband died of HIV-AIDS. If you don’t want to conform to the tradition, then you are an outcast.” As a result, AIDS is spreading.

Rushford and a team of six others led a two-day seminar earlier this year, teaching church leaders how to minister to victims and their families and help stop the spread of AIDS in their own churches and communities. They made a lasting impact on not only Obure’s church, but also on many other church

leaders from across the country.

The results were immediate. “[Church members] are now involved with the people suffering with AIDS, visiting them, helping them, praying for them,” Obure says. “Some also do hospital visits with people now to pray for them so that they don’t feel that they are outcasts.” His church and others are now opening their doors to these afflicted people, offering the love of Christ and practical assistance.

In light of the success of this first venture, Rushford is praying about future trips to other areas ravaged by AIDS. She now calls her ministry A Haven of Hope. Following an October trip to Haiti, she is planning trips to several other countries and a follow-up visit to Kenya.

Back home, the original ministry Rushford launched out of love for her son and her Savior continues to serve those affected and infected by AIDS in the Chattanooga area. True to its mission, Channels of Love seeks to help “eliminate fear and stigma through educational services and materials” and to “be the channel through which God’s unconditional love can ease the suffering of HIV-AIDS.”

For Rushford, success is in knowing many of those she ministered to are in heaven today—finally free from pain.

Rachel Williams is a freelance writer based in Nashville, Tennessee.

You can e-mail Betty Rushford at betty@. To contact Channels of Love, call 423-756-HOPE. Send tax deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Betty Rushford, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795.