

## BLOOD SISTERS

by Bridget Wilson

In the spring of 1983, AIDS was the biggest news story in the nation. A daily onslaught of hysteria about AIDS covered the airways and the print media. San Diego County had fewer than half a dozen <sup>AIDS</sup> related deaths. It seemed that a cure might be just around the corner.

The gay and lesbian communities had begun their first mobilization against AIDS and the bigotry that surfaced with it. Little did we know how much more serious AIDS would become. One group of San Diego women discussed their response to AIDS.

The Women's Caucus of the San Diego Democratic Club was already active in community activities with gay men. One member, Barbara Vick, is a blood donor who had given blood for several years. She was struck by the fact that should a gay man need to tap the blood supply for his own use, or that of his family or friends, he would encounter some difficulties.

One way to defer part of the cost of blood is to have a pool of volunteer donors. Those donors can replace any blood used. Were a gay man to need blood, he might find his pool of potential donors limited. Gay men ~~had been~~ <sup>were</sup> asked to defer donating blood because of the fear of AIDS transmission. Where would they turn if they needed blood?

Vick came up with a simple idea. The women of the community could create a blood fund upon which the entire community could draw. She dubbed us the "Blood Sisters," and the drive began.

She established a fund under the name of the San Diego Democratic Club at the local blood bank. The Women's Caucus then quietly promoted the event.

All remained quiet until the then President of the San Diego Democratic Club, Brad Trauax, a physician and gay activist, was interviewed by the L.A. Times on his role with a newly created Mayor's Task Force on AIDS. Trauax mentioned the upcoming blood drive as an example of community unity about AIDS. That is when it hit the press.

The article brought calls not only from the local press, but from network news as well. By the time the Women's Caucus arrived at the San Diego Blood Bank on July 16, 1983 for the first ever Blood Sisters Blood Drive, the cameras were ready. Three newspapers, four television stations and at least two radio stations covered the event. CBS reported the event: "Lesbian Blood Drive!" they declared in shocked tones.

The caucus' spokeswoman was questioned about the possible public objections to having lesbian blood flow through their veins. Camera operators scurried around trying to photograph real lesbians at the blood bank. Most of those lesbians preferred they didn't.

The publicity also brought out lesbians, in droves. The drive's organizers had expected perhaps 40 to 60 women. By the end of the day, 170 women had come to the blood bank and donated 145 pints of blood. All kinds of lesbians arrived at the completely unprepared blood bank. Women in leather draped themselves over chairs, and each other. Women from the

Frontrunners appeared in their running shorts and teeshirts. Women in dresses, women in jeans, Black women, <sup>Chicanas</sup> Latinas and Mexicanas, bikers and lawyers rubbed elbows. The staff of the blood bank looked faint, not to mention the Blood Bank's Public Relations Director.

The Blood Sisters Blood Fund remained unused until that October when the first units were released, ironically, to help a lesbian woman injured in an automobile accident. At that time, doctors thought that Persons with AIDS would not need blood, and the fund remained a resource for unrelated emergencies.

It was an inspiring idea, however, and in May of the next year, the Fund for Human Dignity honored the Blood Sisters at its annual banquet. Barbara Vick flew to New York to accept the award for the Women's Caucus, for the simple but inspired concept.

The Blood Sisters have been much honored by San Diego's gay and lesbian communities. Other cities have established similar blood drives. In July of 1987, Blood Sister Five brought out 80 women.

In 1983, when Blood Sisters began, five San Diegans had died of AIDS. In the spring of 1988, 800 persons are recorded as having been diagnosed with AIDS, and many more with other HIV-related illnesses.

The need for blood changed when the experimental drug AZT appeared. One of the side effects of AZT is profound anemia. By the winter of 1986, the Blood Sisters were signing out more than 30 units of blood a month to persons with AIDS/ARC. Most of

those receiving the blood were gay men--our friends, our brothers. But there was the 22-year-old former cheerleader who was infected by her hemophiliac boyfriend. There was the Mexican mother of four whose husband was bisexual. She left behind children whose ages ranged from 2 to 11 years. There was also the 49-year-old vocational counselor who was infected through a blood transfusion.

Gay men in San Diego have given a party for the Blood Sisters since the second year of the fund. The Little Brothers provide food, drink and massage to the brave donors. The fund has become a fixture of San Diego's lesbian community and a symbol of their dedication during the AIDS crisis.

The drive's organizers distribute buttons that have the words "Blood Sister" framed by a superhero shield. They are prized items. It is a simple, inexpensive way to show caring.

Women from Seattle, Washington; Austin, Texas; Long Beach and Los Angeles, California are among those who have contacted the San Diego Democratic Club's women. They have begun their own blood drives.

When the Blood Sisters began their drive five years ago, little did we know that the fund would be so needed. Dozens of gay men have received blood from the fund. Many of them have died. Their gratitude for these donations has touched us all.

~~This year the Blood Sisters will give blood twice. The increased demand for blood for Persons with AIDS has forced the drive's organizers to expand the event.~~

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