

ECHO

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Echo's Man and Woman of the Year

Kit Kloeckl and Angela Hughey honored for critical roles in 2014's community issues

Echo's 2014 Man of the Year: Kit Kloeckl

By Art Martori

"People aren't afraid of an HIV test, they're afraid of the results."

Kit Kloeckl



Photos by Fernando Hernández

It's just after work on a Wednesday and people are starting to trickle in for happy hour, and Kloeckl and I are at a table in the dimly lit dining room. Kloeckl, 64, is bald and thin with piercing blue eyes. His body language suggests a reluctance to be at the center of attention. At times he fidgets, crossing his legs and uncrossing them, or toying with a flute of his Stella Artois.

"Because of my position I have to be on stage," he said. "I can do that, and I'm so honored to be recognized as Man of the Year."

But what about heroes? I interrupt. What about people to follow? "I guess I don't see myself as that," he replies slowly. "But it would be amazing if the community said, 'Yeah, I want to follow him.'"

Kloeckl is the executive director of Phoenix-based Aunt Rita's Foundation, a nonprofit that raises money to distribute to local organizations providing services for HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention. Much of their fundraising comes via charitable events, with funds distributed to its benefitting agencies.

Aunt Rita's also devotes much of its resources to awareness, as new infections have been on the rise in recent years.

Right now, much of Kloeckl's energy goes into developing the website hivaz.org, a database of HIV/AIDS resources available throughout Arizona. Rather than information, though, hivaz.org mainly provides links to services for people who are, or suspect they might be, HIV or AIDS positive.

It's such an important project, Kloeckl explained, because these

people face real challenges finding services many of us take for granted. Kloeckl is far too aware of the challenge, he's HIV positive himself.

"I don't know how it happened. I wasn't engaging in any risky behavior," Kloeckl said. "When the diagnosis came, it was a surprise. But I think sometimes when you're dealt a bad hand, you can lament about it and cry in your beer about it, or you can go out and do something about it. And that's what I'm trying to do. Go out and make a difference."

"I almost died"

In 2003, Kloeckl was in the midst of switching insurance providers about the same time he was due for a routine HIV test. But with all the hassle, he remembers, it was too easy to procrastinate, and then forget. A couple years later, he got sick. The diagnosis was pneumocystis pneumonia, an illness that typically affects people with weakened immune systems. For an outwardly healthy Kloeckl, the severity was surprising.

"I almost died," he said of his two-week stay in the hospital. "I wasn't doing anything I felt put me at great risk. I just kept putting it off. I didn't have any reason to think I'm at risk. Then I get an HIV test."

For Kloeckl, the extensive treatment HIV requires wasn't as difficult as facing reactions from people who learned he

was HIV positive. For example, it was now difficult to find a doctor or dentist who would accept him as a patient. But that perceptible rejection

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wasn't nearly as difficult as the unspoken kind he faced in social situations. After all, Kloeckl explains, these days there are typically only two ways you become infected: unprotected sex or sharing needles.

"There's a huge stigma about the disease, and I'm not sure

we're ever gonna win it," he said. "It gets a little bit easier, but I'm gonna tell you, every time I disclose I'm HIV positive, especially in a large group setting, you look around the room and you just know that somebody is going, 'Mmm-hmm, yep.'"

When he first found out, Kloeckl only told close friends and family with the exception of two people: his sister and a close friend, Darrell Decker. Kloeckl struggles to explain why he withheld the news; it was just a feeling that neither of the two would be able to accept he now had an incur-

able disease.

"I kind of had a feeling," Decker, a 59-year-old contractor living in Showlow, Ariz., said of the day he finally heard. "But when he told me, it was no big deal. It didn't change anything ... I don't know why he was so afraid to tell me. As soon as he told me, I said, 'Fine, okay. What else do you want to talk about?' All you can do is just live with it. If you get in an accident, you deal with it. You were just in an accident. So deal with it now."

On World AIDS Day 2012, Kloeckl officially came out as HIV positive at the first RED Brunch, an annual fundraising event held by Aunt Rita's. By then, he'd been HIV positive for about seven years.

"We can end the epidemic. We can do it," Kloeckl tells me. "It's just about getting awareness back. Maybe I can prevent my mistake from happening to someone else."

Know your status

Kloeckl joined Aunt Rita's in late 2007 after moving to Phoenix from Minnesota. There he'd held an executive position at the large agricultural cooperative CHS, Inc. until leaving via a "golden parachute" retirement package. He'd been living in

Phoenix for nearly a decade when a friend remarked that he'd be great at fundraising.

"All your friends are eating and drinking at your house," Kloeckl remembered his friend saying. "You might as well charge them."

After hosting a dinner at his

home on behalf of Aunt Rita's, Kloeckl soon joined its board of directors. A year later, he left the board to become executive director. Since 2005, Aunt Rita's has distributed more than \$1.2 million to 18 HIV/AIDS service organizations, primarily through three events: Viva Aunt Rita's, Arizona AIDS Walk & 5K Run and RED Brunch.

The organization also conducts education and awareness campaigns, including "Know Your Status" which launched last year to encourage HIV testing.

Leading up to World AIDS Day 2013, three local Walgreen's pharmacies offered free HIV tests and 213 people participated, including Phoenix Mayor and first lady Greg and Nicole Stanton. Nicole's brother died of AIDS in 1991 and the couple tirelessly advocates for HIV/AIDS awareness. Last year Mayor Stanton issued a statement last year emphasizing that preventing

new infections is the most effective way to stop the epidemic.

"There is no shame in knowing your status," Mayor Stanton said. "Knowing your status, whether positive or negative, is the only way we are going to stop the spread of this disease. More than 15,000 Arizonans are living with HIV – a 30 percent increase over the last five years, and 40 percent of Arizonans have never had an HIV test."

Of the 213 tested, Kloeckl notes, two people came back positive. While he admits the recent rise in HIV infections is daunting, he points to the mayor's participation as a step in the right direction for raising awareness.

"I'm just thrilled they're willing to support us," he said. "We're, what, the sixth-largest city and our mayor and his wife are on TV getting an HIV test? They're just an amazing couple. I'm just grateful for their support."



A forgotten disease

For many people today, it might be surprising to learn that HIV/AIDS is still an epidemic, is still incurable, and is still killing people.

Last year according to Arizona Department of Health and Human Services, 183 people in Arizona died of HIV and AIDS.

paper or garnered press anymore. Everybody went back to ..." he pauses, perhaps searching for words. "It's a forgotten disease."

Awareness has waned considerably, Kloeckl said, following those dramatic scenes from the late 1980s and early

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Kit Kloeckl

The same year, 312 people in Arizona died from murder, according to the Arizona Department of Public Safety.

"Once medication came along and it became a chronic disease rather than a death sentence, we took our eye off the ball," Kloeckl said. "It was no longer a story in the news-

1990s, with reports about Liberace, Freddie Mercury, Isaac Asimov or Magic Johnson. Some of us might even remember leafing through the pamphlet "Understanding AIDS" mailed out in 1988 to every American household.

"It is very important that everyone understands that a

person can be infected with the AIDS virus without showing any symptoms at all," read the eight-page mailer. "There is also no vaccine to prevent uninfected people from getting the infection. Researchers believe it may take years for an effective, safe vaccine to be found."

It was a condensed and more politely worded version of a report U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop issued to Congress a year earlier.

"The impact of AIDS on our society is and will continue to be devastating," Koop wrote. "This epidemic has already claimed the lives of almost 15,000 Americans, and that figure is expected to increase 12-fold by the end of 1991 – only four years from now."

Koop was close with his estimate. By 1991, more than 156,000 Americans had died, according to AIDS research group amfAR. That year in Arizona, ADHS reported 329 AIDS-related deaths.

Although reported new

cases have fallen steadily since they peaked at 1,045 in 1988, according to ADHS, they have returned in recent years to a level we haven't seen for nearly a decade. Last year, according to ADHS, there were 730 new cases of HIV and AIDS.

To Kloeckl, the increase today is partially due to a younger population that wasn't around when awareness was so mainstream that the U.S. government was mass-mailing every household about it. Today – the era of the 140-character tweet – Kloeckl knows it is going to be a challenge to engage younger people who remain very much at risk. After all, he admits, does a teenager really want to listen to a guy in his '60s?

"What can I say that will make a difference?" he asked. "I truly believe we have to find a way to reach that age group in a way that makes a difference to them."

Sometimes, I cry



Kloeckl and I wrap things up at his home in North Central Phoenix, a mid-1950s ranch house tastefully remodeled inside with lots of burnished hardwood and exposed brick. Our chat is interrupted here and there by his dog, Kaiser, a massive Rottweiler who occasionally bounds into the living room to demand attention.

Living with HIV is manageable, Kloeckl tells me, with the worst thing being a little fatigued once in a while. "You can't let HIV own you," he said. "You have to own the disease."

The conversation again goes back to the recent rise in HIV infections, which seems to be weighing on Kloeckl's mind, as well as the dilemma of reaching a younger demographic. With his measured approach and big-picture focus, it's easy to lose sight of the remarkable progress made by Aunt Rita's.

Established in the late 1980s, Aunt Rita's was named after one of the drag queen persona of one of three friends who often met at Wink's, a bar on Seventh Street north of Camelback Road. Back then their focus was simply handing out money where it was needed, say, when a sick friend came up short on rent. It all started with a bake sale, remembers Skip O'Neill, one of the three founders.

"We raised \$2,400 that first year," remembers O'Neill, now 58. "The next year, we saw we'd been doing good so far, and it went from there. Now every year I go down for the AIDS Walk. Sometimes, I cry, because of the history and where it's gone. There are so many people involved in this community, and I'm so proud.

"I think Kit's done a wonderful job with outreach. I mean, I just couldn't ask for anyone better."