

## **“As AIDS Struggle Continues, Lend a Hand to Cumberland’s House of Compassion”**

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The Valley Breeze; Cumberland, RI

Your neighbor died on Saturday night. As the Patriots kicked off their victorious playoff game, a Cumberland resident passed into peace just off Mendon Road.

Joe Swanson was a friend of many and of mine, a joyful jokester, a down-to-earth companion who made the most out of any troubling situation. Joe died as result of an HIV infection; he represents the rank of Rhode Islanders who are suffering from the disease, and reminds us that AIDS is not a foreign phenomenon but a local issue.

I am your neighbor as well. My name is Kate Otto and I graduated from Cumberland High School in 2004. Thanks to many of your contributions – my dedicated teachers, coaches, bosses and mentors - I was challenged to develop personal discipline, social responsibility, and restless ambition, the skills that have led me to where I am now.

Now I am traveling Africa promoting HIV education with my African peers. I am completing my Masters in Public Administration at NYU in International Health Policy. I am working with AIDS organization “Keep a Child Alive” to provide lifesaving AIDS medicine to children.

I am writing to you now, my neighbors, with a simple message in honor of Joe’s life, which HIV cut short: **AIDS is still a problem.** Many of you lived through the initial fear of AIDS in the 1980’s, when American apathy towards the dying was the result of a lack of information, and being unsure of how to proceed.

Times have changed, and we now have the scientific information, financial resources, and medical technology to address and end the AIDS pandemic. Yet we have failed miserably. AIDS remains the leading cause of death for African-American women in our nation, yet we are hailed as leaders of the developed world. 1,400 children die from AIDS everyday, when all it takes is a single pill (nevirapine) to prevent transmission in childbirth. Imagine if the pandemic was concentrated to Rhode Island? 1,400 of our children dying every day?

The scary reality is that the pandemic is indeed concentrated in areas across our country and our world. It is concentrated to resource-poor areas, where people like you and I are born into unfortunate circumstances – whether it is into a slum in Soweto, South Africa, or into a struggling Providence neighborhood, like the one into which Joe was born 39 years ago.

I am writing to ask you to do something right now, so that my children and your grandchildren, will not be horrified at how we allowed millions of humans to perish from a 100% preventable and treatable disease that we were fully equipped to manage.

The first and most necessary change needed, from households in Africa to homes in America, is to drop our prejudices and stop the stigma associated with AIDS. It is an unfortunate and silent truth that many do not intervene with HIV/AIDS because they feel the victims somehow deserve their fate, imagining they must have been sexually promiscuous, substance abusers, or immoral in some way. (Consider that globally, innocent newborns are consistently infected through childbirth and breastfeeding, from mothers who are often raped into pregnancy, or infected by unfaithful husbands.)

Colleen Scanlon directs the House of Compassion, the only community residence for HIV positive in Rhode Island, and the place of Joe's passing. Though funding is her primary concern, Colleen forcefully describes the most challenging obstacles to overcoming AIDS in RI. "We must consider AIDS a medical, not a moral, issue," she demands in her soft-spoken voice, "or else we will never solve this problem." Colleen warns rightfully that unless we are able to destigmatize the disease, the risk of transmission will only increase, proportionately with the rise of misinformation.

When behavior change is our biggest obstacle that means everyone has an equal and simple responsibility. The most important step to ending AIDS is to understand HIV positive people as patients and not as perpetrators.

The next step is putting your beliefs into action at the local level. The House of Compassion (HOC), for example, is a congregate housing program for low-income, HIV positive individuals committed to sobriety and personal health. HOC offers its residents housing search assistance, case management, transportation assistance, support groups, substance use counseling, relapse prevention, mental health counseling and provides on-site staff 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

But HOC is struggling to survive, requiring more funding and staffing to properly serve their residents. I encourage you to visit the house, and bring friends, family, and coworkers. I implore you to volunteer your time and services. Housecleaning, yard maintenance, cooking meals, and spending time with residents are easy ways to make a difference. Offer your pro-bono financial, administrative, management, marketing, social work and nursing skills. With more help from the community, HOC will be able to serve more HIV positive, and more effectively. Set up opportunities for residents to share their experience with your family, your class, and your workplace. Increasing information and facts about HIV/AIDS will help to decrease risk of transmission.

It is no secret to anyone that AIDS is a highly politicized issue, and that financing quality service provision is often not about helping those in dire need - this is the case worldwide, from African villages to our own town. After spending time at HOC or learning more about AIDS, write to or speak with our local and state legislators and let them know that you care about the issue of HIV/AIDS and want to see the House of Compassion continue to receive funding and state support.

The last step is exporting your knowledge and conviction overseas, where a dollar goes exponentially further than it can at home. Though President Bush should be commended for his commitment of \$18.8 billion to ending AIDS<sup>1</sup>, it is frustrating to think that he could be reaching all 33 million in need of treatment<sup>2</sup> if AIDS received the same funding as the war (which AIDS has trumped in fatalities).

Your taxpayer dollars are being spent to help, but your personal donations to individual organizations working on the ground make an enormous difference to the lives of the infected in poor communities. "Keep a Child Alive", for example, has delivered HIV treatment and care to over 20,000 in the past few years, with 100% of donor contributions spent exclusively on programs and services. ([www.keepachildalive.org](http://www.keepachildalive.org))

I am writing to you because I have had several opportunities to travel the world, and I realize how incredibly privileged I am to have been born and raised in my Rhode Island home. By American

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<sup>1</sup> Data from Bush's President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief indicates it has provided lifesaving AIDS drugs to 1.4 million HIV-positive people, and HIV care to over 6 million people affected by HIV/AIDS since 2003. ([www.pepar.gov](http://www.pepar.gov))

<sup>2</sup> [www.unaids.org](http://www.unaids.org)

standards my family is middle class. By world standards I am individually of the richest people in the world.

I implore you to read, to discuss, and to act. Give your time, your talent, your vote, and your money. There is no reason that AIDS should still be ravaging economies and destroying family structures. AIDS is missing not just from headlines, but also from our own minds and actions.

You can truly make a difference to end AIDS here in our state backyard and in the world. You, my neighbors, taught me in my 18 years here to believe in my own abilities. I now challenge you with the same request. Be thankful for the stability we have in our homes, and do your best to allow others the same.

Thank you and please contact me with questions and comments, or desire for more resources on the AIDS pandemic and how you can help, here and abroad. Happy New Year!