



UNL music professor Jim Hejdkuk has participated in the Nebraska AIDS project buddy program since 1989.

Staci McKee/DN

# Professor gives support as AIDS buddy

By John Adkisson

At first glance, James Hejdkuk and Dwight Miller were as far apart as a Massachusetts prep school and a Nebraska truck stop.

But when Jim, a music professor and choral director at UNL, met Dwight for the first time in 1989 at Lincoln General Hospital, he knew his new friend's zeal for living would make up for the differences in their backgrounds.

Dwight, a former truck driver, had been hospitalized with complications resulting from AIDS.

Jim, who had come to Lincoln three years earlier after teaching 15 years at a private school in suburban Boston, was making his first contact with Dwight after becoming involved in the local



AIDS "buddy" program.

After weeks of training on how to support a person living with the disease, Jim finally was getting to talk to his first assigned friend.

"It didn't take me long to realize that this was a guy who had an incredible amount of determination and feistiness," Jim said, recalling his first visit. "He was adamant about insisting that he was a person living with AIDS, and not a victim of AIDS."

"He knew he was going to die, but he wasn't maudlin about it. He knew he wasn't going to be able to beat the disease, but he was going to make every minute count."

Dwight died two years later, on March 19, 1991, but only after the two had formed what Jim called "a friendship that was definitely a two-way street."

"In a sense I feel very selfish. Dwight did so much more for me than I ever could have done for him," Jim said.

Before meeting Dwight, Jim had learned about the AIDS buddy program, a support organization coordinated by the Nebraska AIDS Project, through an article in the Daily Nebraskan.

Jim said he attended an informational meeting because in working with music and another fine arts, he had seen firsthand the effects of AIDS.

"In the arts — be it music or drama or dance or visual arts, the specter of AIDS has been particularly devastating," he said. "The arts community has been just

decimated by AIDS deaths. So I felt that this was just a very small thing that I could do."

At the first workshop, which told prospective buddies how to deal with AIDS, Jim said he was surprised with the diversity of the people in attendance. Along with Jim, there was a nurse in training, two college students, a legislative aide, two retired women and a man who worked at the state revenue office.

"In the group itself, there were straight people, there were gay people, there were men, there were women, the ages ran from low 20s to the high 70s. You kind of never knew what to expect," Jim said.

"I think the only thing that bound us together is that we wanted to respond to this."

But along with the group's eagerness to learn came uncertainty.

"All of us to a certain extent . . . were wondering what we were getting into and how we were each individually going to respond to the people with which we were going to work."

After completing two weekends of training, Jim learned he was paired with Dwight, one of the leading spokespersons for the AIDS community.

"He was very frank, going to schools and talking about safe sex and the dangers AIDS presented," Jim said. "He figured it was like, 'What do I have to lose?'"

"He certainly wasn't afraid to tell people the way it really was."

The two slowly became friends and found they had at least one thing in common. Dwight had played the cello in high school, and he and Jim were able to find common ground in talking about music. Dwight soon was coming to see Jim's choral groups perform at UNL.

"Bless his heart, he and his partner came to a lot of our concerts," Jim said. "He was very sweet in that way."

But Dwight's biggest passion remained fighting for people with AIDS. In addition to his work locally, he also was involved on the national scene, once driving to Iowa to get a first-hand look at a portion of the AIDS quilt, which at the time consisted of 12,000 panels inscribed with the names of people who had died from the disease.

After seeing the quilt in Iowa, Dwight told Jim that he would like to see it brought to Lincoln.

"I thought, 'Dream on,'" Jim said.

A year later, Dwight was on a committee aimed at bringing the quilt to Lincoln.

After raising the money needed, the quilt went on display in October 1990 and attracted large crowds to the State Fair Park.

By the time the quilt made it to Lincoln, however, Dwight's condition had worsened and he had become frail, Jim said. Even that didn't stop Dwight from staying with the quilt during virtually its entire stay.

"He was there the whole time," Jim said. "He was in his wheelchair, and he kind of whipped around there."

As Dwight's condition deteriorated, the two became even closer. But Jim said Dwight was honest, asking for help only when he needed it and telling his buddy to stay away when he wanted privacy.

"Dwight, when he wasn't feeling well, was honest and said, 'I don't think you'd better come over today, I'm feeling really shitty,'" Jim said. "Or, 'I am feeling pretty shitty, would you come over? I'd appreciate it if you could rub my back, or just sit and talk.'"

Jim said other AIDS buddies have become almost too involved in their friends' affairs. He cited one case in which an AIDS buddy actually was granted power of attorney privilege.

"It can go both ways," Jim said. "If you're not careful, you can become a smother mother."

Although Jim was forced to watch his friend's condition deteriorate, he said Dwight's determination made dealing with it easier for both of them.

"It's kind of a roller-coaster thing," Jim said. "He could be in quite good shape, and then there would be an intermittent spell where he would have to just chill out and just hit the bed or go to the hospital."

By late 1990, Dwight's health had worsened to the point that he was constantly in and out of the hospital.

More and more, he asked Jim to come visit him simply to talk.

"As he got closer to death," Jim said, "he did a lot of reminiscing, talking about his grandmother or things like that."

The last night of Dwight's life was spent in the hospital, surrounded by his parents, his partner with whom he lived, and Jim.

"But before his death, he was bound and determined that he was going to get up and walk around the nurses' pod. Well, there was no way. But his partner and I helped him out of bed. . . . We were basically supporting him, because he couldn't support any kind of weight on his legs. But we let him kind of levitate a

few steps and let him get back into bed. "He was so strong — one's reminded of the famous story of Beethoven sitting up on his death bed and shaking his fist. There was something rather like that about Dwight."

Dwight Miller died later that night. For Jim, dealing with Dwight's death was painful, but he said it made him even more determined to do what he could to help and inform people about AIDS.

"He had come back so many times from being really bad, that it was still kind of a shock when he died," Jim said. "But there was a tremendous outpouring of support."

Dwight's memorial service on March 25, 1991, at First Plymouth Church drew hundreds of people, including community leaders, other people who had AIDS and those who had gotten to know him while he was hospitalized.

"He was the kind of person who made relationships that transcended purely professional bounds," Jim said.

In addition to the support given him by Dwight's other friends, Jim said he also found emotional support through fellow AIDS buddies, most of whom also had lost their buddies.

"One is going to obviously feel a real sense of loss, and to a certain extent a sense of helplessness," Jim said. "You can't help but become emotionally attached. But that's what the support group is for."

After taking some time off, Jim recently was given another buddy to work with. He said his new buddy has not needed him yet, and that he's content to just "wait until he needs some help. You can't be in a rush."

Still, he said he can't imagine having a better first AIDS buddy than Dwight.

"I was spoiled to have been matched up with someone like that," he said. "I'm not sure I could've handled someone who was not as strong as Dwight was. I might have just crumbled under the pressure."

And after having run through the cycle of his first AIDS buddy experience, would Jim recommend the AIDS buddy experience to a friend?

Without a doubt. "I don't think you can draw the picture of the perfect AIDS buddy, because the whole personal element is kind of the driving force behind the relationships," he said. "But if you care about people, you can do it. Definitely." ◆