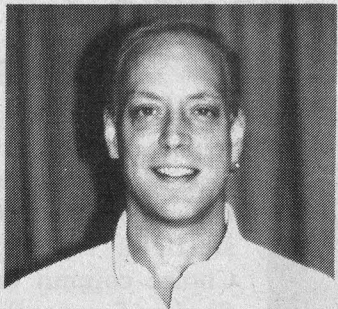


# COVEY'S CORNER

By Craig Covey

## Richard Villaire AIDS Pioneer, 1948 - 1995



life dedicated to non-profit work helping people across the region.

During the first few years of the HIV epidemic, few people knew of its existence or cared that an epidemic was growing. But Richard Villaire helped organize the first support group in Michigan for people with AIDS in 1983 in Detroit. Before the media caught on to AIDS after the death of actor Rock Hudson, Villaire had begun to design the state's first safer sex workshops for Gay men based on programs developed by the Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City. A year before the Special Office on AIDS Prevention was formed as part of the Michigan Department of Public Health, Richard was meeting with owners of the Detroit area Gay bars, trying to convince a skeptical and uninterested group about the coming peril.

Richard was a founder in 1983 of the Wellness Networks, the state's first AIDS agency which today is still one of Michigan's largest organizations providing support groups for people infected and affected by HIV and managing the AIDS hotline. Wellness has been a leader in fundraising and collaboration. In 1985, Richard and I designed and helped organize the first AIDS prevention and education workshops, and began traveling the state under the auspices of the Michigan Organization for Human Rights (MOHR). Later, Richard joined me again in founding MAPP, the Midwest AIDS Prevention Project. MAPP rapidly became a model and leader in innovative behavior-based pre-

vention programs, and now has a staff of nine conducting more than 700 programs across the state per year. Richard was an officer and board member of MAPP for eight years.

There are few HIV/AIDS organizations in the city that do not have Villaire in their history. Richard was an original member of ARC2, the state's first AIDS community coalition. He began the process in 1986 of forming a persons with AIDS committee which later evolved into Friends Alliance, the state's main advocacy group for people with HIV/AIDS. He was a founding board member of Health Emergency Association Detroit, originally a group of volunteers formed to pay bills and provide financial help to people with AIDS. He was a five year member of the AIDS Community Alliance, a group which seeks to facilitate collaboration among community based AIDS organizations. Beyond his continuous desire to help people, Villaire obviously had a way of seeing into the future. He saw needs before they became apparent to others. This was certainly a quality that was sorely needed during the nascent AIDS crisis.

Richard did not like the backbiting and jealousies that separate so many of the organizations in our community, and he tried to bridge these divisions. He supported direct care support for people with AIDS and HIV, he worked to empower people in the syndrome, and he put much effort into education and prevention.

It is doubtful that many of us thought

AIDS would reach the devastating levels that are now apparent worldwide. And few knew the epidemic would become a long term fact of life. Those of us who thought this would be a couple of years of inconvenient safer sex and condom use are dejectedly looking at another decade at least of risk and fear. As the epidemic stretches out, it is important to remember the lessons we have learned, and the early pioneers who make up part of the history of AIDS.

The history of the AIDS epidemic is filled with people in denial, from Gay bath house patrons to public health workers to Senators and Presidents. Denial is still the largest barrier to reaching people about the deadly seriousness of the issue. It was people like Mr. Villaire who goaded the rest of us into action and probably kept the crisis from becoming even more devastating.

We still need leaders when it comes to HIV. It is ironic that we lose Richard Villaire at this juncture. The rise in infection among the youth and heterosexual populations is being mirrored by a frightening rise in risky sexual behavior by Gay men. A "second wave" of infection in Gay men, a population already devastated in many cities, has been documented across the nation.

As the country and its politicians lurch to the right and slash social service funding, people who will suffer will include those fighting AIDS. It is up to those of us lucky enough to remain behind to pick up the torch that Richard so superbly carried.