

Indiana Cares

Honors Bloomington Couple

by Gary Pool

Doris and Bob Fox were married on July 16, 1948. He hales from York, Pennsylvania and she from Greenville, South Carolina. They met in Greenville while Bob was stationed there in the air force. In 1967 his burgeoning career, in educational media, brought the couple and their three boys, Bob Jr., Tom and John, to Bloomington.

"Tom was so different in the way he played," Doris recalled, as we chatted across the kitchen table in their comfortable home. "The other two were all guns and soldiers and that kind of thing. Tom?" she smiled softly. "The first thing he ever asked for Christmas was a little kitchen sink, refrigerator and stove set." "His level of interests was far broader than that of the other two boys," Bob added. "He read a lot, liked plays and the arts." "There was always this thing in the back of my mind that said he was gay," Doris mused. "But then, on the other hand, he dated girls." She shrugged. "He never discussed it with us."

Tom grew up, went to college at I.U. and eventually moved to Georgia, where he landed a good job with The Atlanta Constitution, the major daily newspaper. He bought a house. He was successful. In 1981 the family gathered at Doris's mother's home in Greenville for Thanksgiving. Tom brought a friend. "When I opened the front door," Doris remembered, "he was standing there with this young man, and there was absolutely no question in my mind in that moment that this was a different situation. There was an aura about them. I knew that this was a relationship. -- That day I finally had to accept the fact that there was no doubt about it. Tom was gay. -- I didn't mind so much, really. I wanted him to have someone in his life. I just didn't want his being gay to come between us."

A little less than six years later, the Foxes would learn that their son had AIDS when he was hospitalized with pneumonia. Tom had known he was HIV positive since January of 1987, but he refrained from telling his parents until he could no longer maintain the secret. Thus, in October began the long, ravagingly painful ordeal that would culminate in Tom's death in July, 1989.

"My mind was spinning," Doris admitted. "We were devastated beyond belief. But there was just nothing available at that point about AIDS. I called the Damian Center and they sent a little pamphlet the Red Cross puts out, and it was so outdated, so inadequate."

In 1988 there was no support group for the families of AIDS victims in Bloomington, even though the number of local cases was relatively high, given the state-wide average. So, being the enterprising and energetic people they are, there was nothing for the Foxes to do but to start one. With the assistance of a local physician, Doris and Bob founded what today has become Project FIND, the primary support and assistance agency for AIDS victims and their families in Monroe County. Two years later the Foxes were also instrumental in starting the first PFLAG chapter in southern Indiana.

"Parents of homosexual children are scared to death to discuss it," Doris told a local reporter for a newspaper article on PFLAG in May, 1992. "But they need to. One of the best things they can do is find a support group where they can express their feeling about their child's homosexuality with other parents who understand. -- Sharing lifts the burden of having to lie." More than fifty people showed up for the first PFLAG organizational meeting. The Bloomington chapter has been thriving ever since.

The Foxes believe strongly that the parents and straight friends of gay people need to come out of their own closets and help lead the struggle against ignorance, bigotry and intolerance. "I think it's up to parents to come out and say, 'We're not going to put up with you any more, Pat Robertson.' Parents of gays and lesbians need to become advocates for their children," Doris insisted. "It makes me very angry when you have ministers who stand up in the pulpit and tell people that everybody that's homosexual is rotten to the core. People are going to feel free then to do whatever they want to homosexuals. They can beat up on them and feel it's OK. Parents have to stand up and say: 'My son, my daughter is a human being. This is a person. This is not some animal.'"

But the Foxes also have little time for parents who insist on clinging to disappointed expectations about their gay or lesbian progeny. Referring to one mother of a gay son, Doris related: "For instance she says to me, 'I want him to come through that door with two children and a beautiful wife on his arm.' Well, I said to her, those are things that you want for yourself, for your reasons. He has to do what's best for him. The thing that parents have to come to terms with is that they can not live their lives through their children. A child has its own life. The only things you can give your children are roots and wings."

On November 17, 1995, Indiana Cares, a community-based organization established to enhance and sustain the quality of life for individuals affected by HIV/AIDS, presented Doris and Bob with their Super Star Award. The Foxes were nominated in three categories: Advocate, Educator and Buddy. It would be very difficult indeed to find people more deserving of such recognition.

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