



Terry Taylor, RN: Courageous HIV/AIDS Activist

By: **Phoebe Pollitt**

Abstract

Terry Sullivan Taylor, RN, was born in Charlotte in 1941 and graduated from Watts Hospital School of Nursing in Durham in 1959. While Taylor was in nursing school, her sister Tonda “came out” as a lesbian. Her parents reacted as many people reacted in 1959—they sent her to a psychiatrist to “get straightened out.” In the early 1980s, while working as an emergency room nurse at Charlotte Memorial Hospital, she cared for her first AIDS patient. At that time, HIV/AIDS was commonly misunderstood and feared. The popular press called AIDS a disease of the “four H club” - homosexuals, heroin addicts, hemophiliacs, and Haitians. At the same time Taylor was learning about HIV/AIDS as a nurse, the disease became personal. Her heterosexual brother, who received tainted blood transfusions to fight cancer, and her physician father both died of HIV/AIDS.

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By NCNA Member Dr. Phoebe Pollitt, RN; Nursing History Council Co-Chair

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Shortly after their deaths, Taylor married and moved to Boone, where she started the first Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) chapter in the region. Taylor recalled that she constantly received negative and hateful phone calls and letters. Things became more contentious when people with HIV/AIDS began being diagnosed in Boone. Taylor remembered her encounter with the first AIDS patient at the local hospital this way:

It was March 1989. The patient was an exchange student from Zaire. My husband, a physician, asked me if I would visit this patient. I went the next day. Signs were on the door to gown up, put on gloves, and a mask before entering the room. I chose not to do that. I walked in, introduced myself and sat by the bedside. He said nothing for a long time. I said “I thought you might need a friend.” He turned his head to look at me and said, “I’ve been praying for a friend—you’re not what I expected, but thank you.”

Soon after this meeting, Taylor invited health care professionals, people with HIV/AIDS, local clergy and others to establish the HOPE Support Group. HOPE volunteers cared for AIDS patients in their homes and the hospital. Volunteers

spent time with people who were rejected by their families, even as they lay dying.

Word of Taylor’s work spread. In 1989, she presented a workshop at the PFLAG Task Force on AIDS National Conference in Washington, D.C. It was so well received that for the next decade she traveled around the country speaking to hundreds of groups about HIV/AIDS. Taylor described one significant moment during these years.

My job was to open hearts and minds through personal experiences I had with people with AIDS. One of the best compliments I received was the night I was ready to go to the podium at George Mason University. Before I was introduced, the leader of the conference whispered to me “I was up here on this stage three weeks ago introducing Bill Clinton. I was given no instructions. For your presentation I was told to be sure all the name tags of those in the audience were written with permanent ink so it wouldn’t run down their shirts when their tears hit them.”

Taylor remained a leader in the local PFLAG and HOPE chapters. Her home was always open to anyone needing a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear, or an embrace. Her compassion and dedication to those marginalized by society, because of a frightening fatal disease, illuminate the highest calling in nursing. She was willing to risk her reputation, her livelihood, and her life for those needing her care.

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Today we know HIV/AIDS is caused by a virus that can infect anyone. Effective medicines became widely available in 1996 and have been improved significantly over the years. HIV/AIDS patients are no longer scorned thanks in large part to advocates like nurse Terry Taylor.

Are you interested in joining the Nursing History Council? We would love to have you! NCNA members are welcome to join any council they wish. To change your council status, simply update your Member Profile at www.ncnurses.org or email LaurenZahn@ncnurses.org.

The opinions expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect the view of the North Carolina Nurses Association or its board of directors. ■