

THE

# FRONTLINE

## Hearing the Call, Rising to the Challenge

Mairi McKeever is one of PRC's longest-standing supporters. Mairi started as a Public Benefits Advocate at PRC in 1995, becoming the head of the Benefits Counseling Program in 1998; and in 2002, she served as PRC's Interim Executive Director. Although Mairi resigned to spend more time with her young children, she remained steadfastly committed to the agency and became a donor and board member, a position she held for eight years. She is currently a Managing Attorney with the Volunteer Legal Services Program of the Bar Association of San Francisco. We sat down with Mairi and asked her to reflect on her experience with PRC. What became very clear is that Mairi is a truly outstanding advocate for PRC and our clients.



### How did you become involved with PRC?

As a native San Franciscan, I witnessed the start of the AIDS crisis firsthand — I saw my mother, who was a physician, and her colleagues respond to the disease. After finishing law school at UC Hastings in the spring of 1995, I went to work at AIDS Benefits Counselors [PRC's predecessor agency] as a benefits counselor. At the time, if you were diagnosed as HIV-positive, it was, to use an overused term, a death sentence. We were getting people on disability benefits with no hope of ever returning to work.

*HEARING THE CALL CONTINUED ON PAGE 4*

## Speaking the Same Language: Expansion of Culturally Competent Benefits Advocacy

Immigration has become a political football in recent months, with election-year bravado eclipsing the needs of a vulnerable population. However, Positive Resource Center remains steadfast as always in its commitment to the health and wellbeing of the immigrant community in San Francisco, able to provide accessible and culturally competent services at no cost, thanks to the generous support of our donors.

In June, PRC further expanded the Benefits Counseling Program's language capacity when the agency hired Grace Matejka as a Spanish-speaking Bilingual Benefits Advocate. "I am very lucky to be a part of such an accomplished team," said Matejka. "I am proud to be able to provide advocacy services to a frequently underserved Spanish-speaking disabled population."

San Francisco is one of the first cities in the United States to adopt a local language access ordinance to help government agencies such as the Department of Public Health

*SPEAKING THE SAME LANGUAGE CONTINUED ON PAGE 2*

## Note from the Executive Director



This year, the political conversation has centered on what PRC has kept at the forefront for the last 23 years:

the wellbeing of the uninsured and the unemployed. With high unemployment and healthcare reform destined for another partisan battle, PRC's skilled staff remains committed to helping our clients with HIV or mental health disabilities maintain their healthcare and achieve financial stability. The Obama Administration's National HIV/AIDS Strategy highlighted vocational rehabilitation as a means to alleviate health disparities amongst HIV-positive people — what our Employment Services Program has been promoting for years. Our Benefits Counseling Program's success rates continue to garner attention, recently partnering with API Wellness to disseminate our strategies to service providers statewide. I feel honored to see the work we've done at PRC providing financial and healthcare security to disabled people on a broader scale, a feat only possible with the help of our generous supporters.

BRETT ANDREWS,  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

## Welcome to the Board and Staff

PRC is excited to welcome new Board members **Michael F. Bell**, **Laura Lee, Esq.**, and **L. Julius M. Turman, Esq.** and new staff members **Taylor Hoang, Esq.**, **Leigh Illion**, **Grace Matejka**, and **Tracilyn Tasch, Esq.**

*SPEAKING THE SAME LANGUAGE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1*

and the San Francisco Police Department expand their language capabilities to better serve non-English speaking communities. Likewise, PRC has made it a priority to hire bilingual Benefits Counseling staff, a move that cost-effectively increases the agency's cultural competency in order to serve our clients with limited English proficiency. PRC's legal team presently includes attorneys, advocates and legal assistants who speak English, Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Tagalog, and Arabic.

Learning English as an adult can be challenging. For immigrants who are disabled, who may not even be literate in their native language, lack of English proficiency presents an enormous barrier to accessing the government benefits and social services they need to meet basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, and routine medical care. Almost 10% of PRC's clients have limited English proficiency.

In addition to the full complement of benefits counseling services, our multilingual staff specialize in helping clients access benefits such as the Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants (CAPI), a California program that provides income and health benefits to disabled and senior immigrants who are not eligible for federal benefits because of their immigration status. Few immigrants are aware of CAPI, and many who do apply for CAPI find their applications rejected. Positive Resource Center continues to expand its language capacity so that non-English speaking clients have the financial resources to afford food, clothing, and shelter, and have health benefits to maintain their health and wellbeing.

Many immigrants, particularly those who do not speak English well, do not apply for public benefits, even when eligible. "Many of my clients who are immigrants often come into the office unaware that there are government programs available to them," said Senior Bilingual Benefits

Advocate, Fernando Aguayo-García, "or they have had their applications mistakenly denied by local agencies in the past." Additionally, even legal immigrants can be afraid that accessing government benefits will somehow affect their immigration status. He says, "The intensive questioning applicants undergo can scare people off from accessing the benefits they deserve, particularly if they have difficulty understanding the process due to a language barrier."



New Bilingual Benefits Advocate, Grace Matejka

Our immigrant clients face additional impediments when service providers fail to make appropriate language translation services available to them. Quite often, even when translators are available, they fail to capture the important nuances of language, or add their own interpretations, creating inaccuracies in documenting medical and psychiatric histories and misunderstandings when presenting evidence before an Administrative Law Judge in Social Security disability cases. Working directly with legal professionals who speak their language ensures that the nuance, dialect and inflection of the client's speech, so critical to conveying meaning, is captured.

"PRC has already made enormous strides in increasing the language capacity of the Benefits Counseling Program," says Andy Chu, Managing Legal Director, himself multilingual in Cantonese and Mandarin. "We remain committed to continuing to expand our capacity in order to serve even more of the culturally diverse population of San Francisco."

## Pride Brunch and Bare Chest Calendar Gala are Smashing Successes!

Hosted by PRC Advisory Board members Donna Sachet and Gary Virginia, the 12th Annual Pride Brunch, held June 26 at the Hotel Whitcomb, was a highlight of the year. Pride Brunch honors the SF Pride Parade's Grand Marshals and raises vital funds for Positive Resource Center. Among this year's honorees were longtime PRC supporter Ambassador James C. Hormel and Andy Bell of the band Erasure. This year's Pride Brunch raised \$27,000 for PRC!

PRIDE BRUNCH PHOTOS COURTESY OF RICK CAMARGO PHOTOGRAPHY, WWW.CAMARGOPHOTO.COM



PRC Executive Director Brett Andrews and Donna Sachet pose with Pride Brunch honoree James C. Hormel and his partner Michael Nguyen.



Community Grand Marshal Cheer SF gets ready to perform a routine. PRC is the 2009-10 major beneficiary of Cheer SF.



Hosts Donna Sachet and Gary Virginia revel in another successful event, which raised a record \$27,000 for PRC.



Brett Andrews enjoys the brunch with newest board members Julius Turman and Michael Bell.



Dr. Betty Sullivan of Betty's List, Celebrity Grand Marshal Andy Bell, journalist Jennifer Viegas, and Donna Sachet smile for the camera.

The first ever Bare Chest Calendar Dinner Date Auction Gala, held August 24 at the Sir Francis Drake, was a big hit. The live auction, including a fabulous dinner and show and a date with each of the handsome Calendar Men, raised an unprecedented \$36,000 benefiting PRC and AIDS Emergency Fund!

BARE CHEST GALA PHOTO COURTESY OF BILL WEAVER

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### **How did you end up making the transition from staff to board?**

In the fall of 2001, I needed to find a better work-family life balance and had put in my notice of resignation. At the same time, PRC was going through a financial crisis and had to lay off a third of the staff, PRC was dealing with an executive director transition and the board asked me to stay on as Interim Executive Director. When we hired an Executive Director, I moved onto the board.

### **What made you decide to join the board even after resigning from your position?**

Well, it was a time of uncertainty for the agency and I wanted to see PRC through the storm. Attorneys are usually problem-solvers and I didn't want to leave PRC before this financial crisis was resolved. The fact that I, along with many of the board members from that time, stayed on the board for years to come is a testament to the agency. PRC's high-quality services and the change they make in people's lives can inspire that devotion. I'd be remiss if I didn't give thanks to my husband, Chuck Lewkowitz. He and I were engaged when I started working at ABC and he's been an ardent supporter ever since. I couldn't do it without him.

### **What changes have you seen in the HIV/AIDS epidemic during your years with PRC?**

Antiretroviral therapy really changed the nature of HIV as a disability. At the height of the epidemic, an HIV diagnosis was a short road from disability to death. After the new medications came out in 1996, it became what we called a "cycle of disability," with some clients requiring disability benefits for the first time, while others had become well enough to return to work for the first time. Around that time, I met Mark Misrok at Positive Resources and he had noticed similar shifts among his clients. Mark eventually asked if I would come by and talk to some of his clients. To our surprise, dozens of

people arrived to learn about benefits and employment for HIV-positive people. It wasn't the best training I've ever led [laughs], but really we were exploring totally new territory.

The eventual merger worked to address the needs resulting from the new cycle of disability from under one roof. These days, an HIV diagnosis seems more like a long road, with different paths for every person affected. I've witnessed PRC's services become more comprehensive, responding to our clients' need for a greater depth of service. I've been impressed by both programs' abilities to transfer their successes with HIV-positive clients to people disabled by mental health issues. Both disabilities have "hidden" symptoms, so they aren't the most obvious candidates for traditional services directed toward the disabled. The advocacy and training provided by PRC has helped the inequalities associated with both.

### **What keeps you engaged with PRC after so many years?**

My guiding value in all of my work is 'justice'. I went into law to help the disenfranchised and unrepresented. There are significant inequalities with regard to income in this country and PRC works to address them. Since first joining the agency, I've seen firsthand the significant difference that receiving Social Security benefits can make in someone's life, and witnessed the impact job counseling and training can make to address inequality in employment opportunities.

### **Why do you think the community's support is so important?**

I think PRC is an agency whose services have a direct impact on people's lives. The programs address issues familiar to us all. I know that my donations to PRC over the years have been well used and managed and have gone directly to these services that make such a difference in clients' lives.

## **Announcements**

### **New Disability Law Library**

The Benefits Counseling Program is pleased to announce the Van Löben Sels/RembeRock Law Library this summer. The new library houses a collection of legal and medical reference materials such as the DSM IV and other texts, allowing our attorneys and advocates to serve more clients by providing on-site resources necessary to win cases. PRC is grateful to the Van Löben Sels/RembeRock Foundation for providing seed funding for the much needed law library.

### **Employment Services Expands Client Base**

This year, as the result of our longstanding community partnership with the CA Department of Rehabilitation, the Employment Services Program expanded its client base to serve DOR consumers with mental health disabilities. People with mental health disabilities encounter many of the same challenges and stigmas that people disabled by HIV face when trying to re-enter the workforce. Our new mental health clients have already benefited greatly from the proven vocational rehabilitation strategies of our Employment Services team.

## Lisa's Story

*Much of the important work of PRC's programs happens behind closed doors, one-on-one between our clients and our staff. Lisa\*, a PRC client for many years, met with staff member Kenyon DeVault to share her story with the community.*

\* Name has been changed

"PRC has been a lifesaver for me," says Lisa, who came to PRC ten years ago needing benefits counseling when her Social Security benefits came up for review. For many years, she had been disabled by HIV and a serious heart condition and was unable to maintain regular employment despite her dream of returning to work. She had previously worked in law enforcement and the court system to support herself and her three children, but had to defer her career plans due to her disability. PRC's team of attorneys helped Lisa build the case for her continuing disability review, compiling important medical and legal documents to ensure her financial benefits and health insurance continued.

In late 2007, Lisa was hospitalized and given devastating news that her heart was failing. Making matters worse, the doctor warned her that she wouldn't be able to find a hospital willing to put an HIV-positive person on the transplant list. Lisa refused to accept this death sentence and began her own research. She soon found a medical journal article about a case similar to hers written by two physicians at University of California, San Francisco. She contacted the article's authors and met with a cardiologist at UCSF. The physician decided to take a chance on Lisa and in February 2008, Lisa became the first HIV-positive patient at UCSF to receive a heart transplant, setting a new standard of care for those with HIV and heart problems.

The transplant gave Lisa a new lease on life and she began to seriously contemplate returning to work. She says, "A life-altering experience like that makes you reevaluate your goals and become deliberate about

what you want." With her health on an upswing, two of her children beginning postgraduate studies and the youngest about to begin high school, she knew that the time was right to take stock of her career prospects, and sought out PRC's services once more.

Thanks to the generosity of PRC's donors, the resources and support she needed were available for her to achieve her long-deferred career goals. Lisa met with PRC's Employment Services Program's Vocational Counselor, Julie Salzman who conducted a comprehensive vocational evaluation. She attended resume workshops and computer training courses, clarifying her career goals. Lisa determined the next step for her would be law school, with the goal of eventually providing legal services to low-income and underserved communities.

To help her realize her dream, PRC linked Lisa with Louis Dunn, a member of PRC's Employment Services Advisory Board and a former counselor at the California Department of Rehabilitation (DOR), who volunteered to help her with the often-complicated DOR application process. PRC partners with DOR to provide our clients with additional financial resources for supplemental job training and education. With Louis' assistance and PRC's stellar reputation with the DOR, Lisa was approved for services shortly thereafter.

However, Lisa's excitement stumbled a bit. The counselor assigned to her at the DOR was unsure whether Lisa's education plan was appropriate, questioning her life expectancy and whether her health was up to the



Managing Director of Employment Services, Joe Ramirez-Forcier (middle) consults with Employment Specialists Melanie Raygoza and Scott Gardner

stresses of law school. Lisa knew she could handle it. "What's more stressful? Raising three children on Social Security," asks Lisa, "or three years of law school?" Lisa spoke to her doctors and they confirmed that she was physically and mentally strong enough to attempt law school.

Unsure what to do next, Lisa turned to Joe Ramirez-Forcier. "Even though Joe's not a therapist, I could talk to him like that," laughs Lisa. "He was always there with the emotional support I needed." Joe encouraged her to continue to pursue her goals, despite these roadblocks. Joe attended meetings with Lisa and her DOR counselor, advocating on her behalf. "Joe reminded me constantly that I had both the capacity and the drive to be successful in law school," said Lisa. "He stepped up for me many times, making sure I was on track with what was expected of me at the DOR."

A couple of months ago, Lisa received a phone call from her DOR counselor. Expecting bad news, Lisa was thrilled to hear the words "congratulations" on the other end of the line. Having her education plan approved means that her goal of being attorney is that much closer, as the DOR will subsidize many of the expenses associated with furthering her education. Lisa is now researching LSAT classes and the law school admissions process, and is excited about returning to school next September.

# POSITIVE RESOURCE CENTER

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## Please help disabled people access financial resources and healthcare.

There are many ways to support PRC. However you decide to help, please consider making a gift today. PRC is a 501(c)3 nonprofit and our tax identification number is 94-3078431. Donations are tax deductible to the fullest extent allowed by law.

### Donate by check or credit card

You can always mail your gift — use the donation envelope included in this newsletter for your convenience.

### Give online

Make a secure online donation at [www.positiveresource.org/donate.asp](http://www.positiveresource.org/donate.asp).

### Make a big difference with small monthly gifts

Making a small donation on a regularly recurring schedule adds up and will help to sustain our programs on a long-term basis.

### Matching gifts

Increase your gift's impact. Many companies will match charitable donations made by their employees. Check with your employer's Human Resources Department.

### And more!

See [www.positiveresource.org/support.asp](http://www.positiveresource.org/support.asp) for more ways to show your support.

Contact PRC's Development Department for more information at 415-777-0333 ext. 278 or 272; [development@positiveresource.org](mailto:development@positiveresource.org)

### Attend fundraising events

Check out the PRC homepage and Facebook fan page for details about events that raise vital funds for PRC, like our year-end Stakeholder Reception, Pride Brunch and the Bare Chest Calendar.

### Leave a legacy

Naming PRC in your will or trust is a wonderful way to support our work that may provide desirable tax benefits.

### Donate used items at Community Thrift

Donate your used clothing, furniture and other items to the Community Thrift Store in San Francisco's Mission District, and designate PRC as the beneficiary of the sale proceeds.

## Save the Date

### PRC's Annual Community Celebration

**Tuesday, December 14, 2010**

JW Marriott's Level III Lounge  
500 Post Street

Sponsored by



Kaiser Permanente

E-mail [KenyonD@positiveresource.org](mailto:KenyonD@positiveresource.org) for more information.