

'Cash for the Cure'  
Cancer society to throw a  
tuxedo-free ball

# the FORUM

NEWSWEEKLY

## COVER STORY

**T**he Philadelphia Center will celebrate its 20th Auction Against AIDS from 6-10:30 p.m. Aug. 15 in the Eldorado Resort and Casino Grand Ballroom in downtown Shreveport. Brett Malone, executive director of the center since March 2008, said when the first auction was held, the disease was still being referred to as GRID (gay-related immune deficiency).

"It wasn't long after that, it was recognized the disease was not confined to the gay community," Malone said. "And it became referred to as HIV/AIDS."

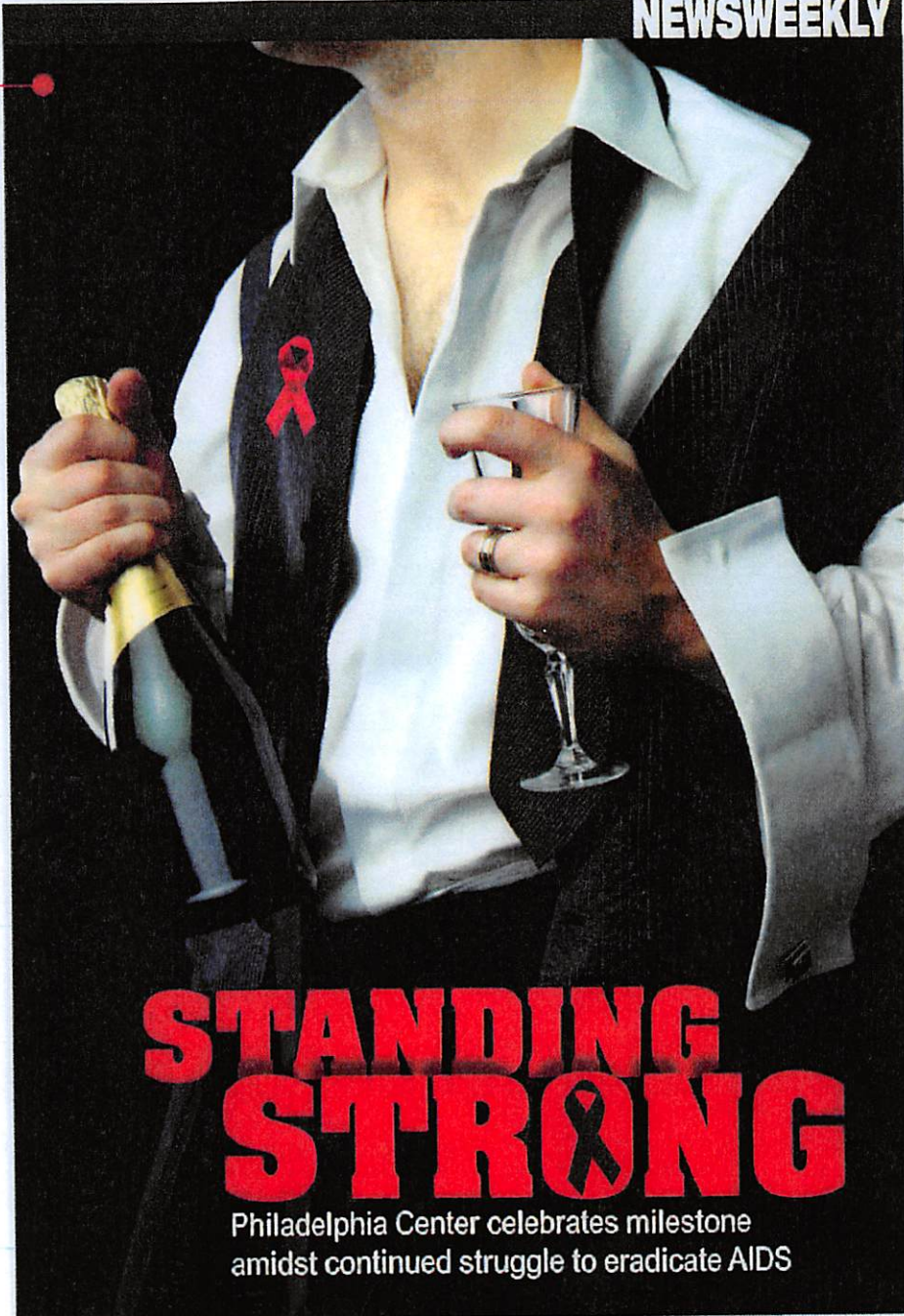
When first identified, HIV/AIDS was considered an automatic death sentence. But that is no longer the case as new treatments and drugs have been found to keep those living with HIV/AIDS healthier longer than ever before. Many people alive and well today have been living with it for as many as 20 years.

Philadelphia Center Executive Director Emeritus Robert "Bobby" Darrow is one of those survivors. "To be informed that you are infected with HIV is shocking," Darrow said. "In 1985, it was devastating. I was told I was infected with HTLV-III [The term HIV was not yet widely used,] and that meant I had GRID. In my mid-20s, I thought my life was over. Based on what little information that existed and with no medical treatment available at the time, my local doctor gave me six months to live."

Darrow then moved to Manhattan in hopes of benefiting from the medical research happening in that epicenter of the crisis. There, he became involved in AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), an organization committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis. Their demands included better access to drugs as well as cheaper prices, public education about AIDS and the prohibition of AIDS-related discrimination.

After moving back to Shreveport in the late '80s, Darrow helped Dr. William Spurlock and a handful of other caring people as they met to form the Philadelphia Center.

"In the late 1980s," remembered founding board member, attorney Byron Richie, "I was doing a lot of legal work in the health and disability insurance field. At the time, one of the hot issues was the extent of coverage for HIV/AIDS and related illnesses affecting people suffering from AIDS. With a good deal of success in defending a number of HIV/AIDS patients on health and disability issues as well as discrimination, I was contacted by the people who were organizing a new charity, the Philadelphia Center, to educate the public in prevention and advocate for and serve the needs of those suffering from HIV/AIDS."



## STANDING STRONG

Philadelphia Center celebrates milestone  
amidst continued struggle to eradicate AIDS

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Philadelphia Center celebrates milestone amidst continued struggle to eradicate AIDS

By Karl Houston  
Photography by Lora Fairchild

Bobby Darrow,  
Philadelphia Center  
executive director  
emeritus

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In those early years of the disease and the organization, there was much to overcome: the stigma associated with having it, the bias against gays when it was perceived to be "the gay cancer" and rampant misinformation about the ways one could contract the disease.

"I remember my first meeting with the organizers of the center," Richie said. "And it is amazing how far their vision has taken us."

Malone said, "There have been great strides forward in those years. Medical advancements have made it less an immediate death sentence, and social attitudes have loosened as more and more people have been directly touched by the disease."

However, Malone is concerned there may be complacency afoot because people no longer take the threat as seriously as before and the media has seemed to back away from the subject as a serious topic in the last few years.

"Early on, there was so little information about the disease, that it created an environment of fear," said Laurel Richie, one of this year's auction co-chairmen. "Unfortunately, with the advent of new medications, many have become dangerously complacent about the ongoing need to continue work toward finding a cure and to curb transmission of HIV through continued education, particularly for teens."

Therefore, as long as that is the case, the Philadelphia Center must still stand strong on the front lines of education and service and thus the need to continue to

raise funds for the fight. That is where the Philadelphia Center's Auction Against AIDS comes in to play.

For the 20th anniversary, in addition to Laurel, auction co-chairs are Myron Griffing and Myles Cameron. "This year, we have assembled some fabulous items including original artwork, gift certificates and dinners out in some of the area's best restaurants," Laurel said. "There is truly something for everyone."

As usual, the décor for the event will be impressive. Decorations chairman Grant Rachal said, "Our theme this year is simply 'A Great Big Ole Birthday Bash,' celebrating 20 rewarding years serving our community. This year as always, we will have a fun and exciting atmosphere with everything from oversized wrapped gifts and light fixtures resembling large birthday cakes overlooking a grand three-tier birthday cake placed in the center of the room. This will hold auction items for people to bid on. The colors are fun and sophisticated but a bit muted in scale like burnt orange, slate blue and puce green."

Rachal said, "The entryway of the ballroom will be lined with 20 7-foot-tall simulated candles recognizing our top 20 donors, each candle representing a year of our being in service. The ballroom is very art deco with magnificent chandeliers outlining its intimate and small space."

Laurel said, "This year, we are including a look back at

previous auctions including food items from past menus. We will have a cash bar staffed with volunteers so that all tips received will go directly back to the center. This Auction Against AIDS is our biggest fund-raiser for funds that are still desperately needed to allow the center to continue to serve our community."

Figures today attest to the fact that though the movement has come a long way, there is still a great distance to cover before arriving at the promised land of eradicating the disease. In 2008, 1,154 persons were newly diagnosed with HIV: 67 percent men, 33 percent women; 856 persons were newly diagnosed with AIDS: 66 percent men, 34 percent women. There are 16,418 persons currently living with HIV/AIDS in Louisiana. There have been 28,843 cumulative cases detected in Louisiana (including 308 pediatric) and 12,195 cumulative deaths from HIV/AIDS in Louisiana (including 100 pediatric deaths).

That is why the Auction Against AIDS is so important. "We know times are tough," said Laurel said. "But we can promise a fun evening at a bargain price for a very worthwhile cause."

"The outer area of the ballroom will be draped off with bar-height tables so guests can grab a bite to eat and gather to catch up with friends," Rachal said. "In one way or another, HIV/AIDS affects each and every one of us. Despite the

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— Bobby Darrow

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continuing strides we are making in fighting this virus, I know we have many chapters to write before coming to a solution."

The evening will include a live and silent auction, food, nine cash bars (one dedicated entirely to martinis) and live musical entertainment by Toi Evans and Jason Sepulvado.

Darrow has many vivid and emotional memories of the 20 years since the organization and the auction first began.

"I remember people of goodwill working for many years at the Philadelphia Center with no pay because the funds were simply not there," Darrow said. "I remember many trips to pick up or drop off someone at the downtown bus terminal. They were

going home to die or coming home to die. I remember the peace in knowing that when the need for compassion and charity for those living with HIV/AIDS became evident, a small group of caring souls heard the call and formed the Philadelphia Center."

They have heard that call now for 20 years and counting. For more information, call 222-6633, Ext. 24, or visit [philadelphiacenter.org](http://philadelphiacenter.org). Tickets are \$20 and are available for purchase at the Philadelphia Center, 2020 Centenary Blvd. in Shreveport.

"I also remember the first time I didn't cry at a funeral," Darrow said. "I had just attended too many."

Byron Richie, founding board member, and Laurel Richie, auction co-chair



Grant Rachal, event decorations chairman



Brett Malone, Philadelphia Center executive director

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— Laurel Richie

## LOUISIANA VOTER REGISTRATION & EDUCATION WEEK REGISTER TO VOTE AT SHREVE MEMORIAL LIBRARY BRANCHES

The Caddo Parish Registrar of Voters office will conduct mobile voter registration throughout Caddo Parish during voter registration and education week, August 24th - August 28th at Shreve Memorial branch libraries. For a schedule of locations and dates please call 226-6891 or click on [www.caddovoter.org](http://www.caddovoter.org). You may register to vote, change your name, party or registration address at any registration site. Please bring your photo identification and proof of residency in Caddo Parish.

Please call 226-6891 or click on [www.caddovoter.org](http://www.caddovoter.org) for more information. Appropriate forms can be mailed to you for voter changes.

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ERNIE ROBERSON, CERA  
Registrar of Voters