

Ruth Coker Burks

Activist
Humanitarian
Speaker



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Citizen Ruth – Be Brave, Be of Service, Be Authentic

In the darkest hour of the AIDS epidemic, Ruth Coker Burks began caring for people who were abandoned by their families.

“In 1984, I became an accidental AIDS advocate. I was 25 with a 2-year old daughter living my life. Then, I met Jimmy, my first AIDS patient.”

When mothers and fathers rejected their gay sons, Ruth stepped in to love and care for them. She estimates that she's cared for more than 1,000 people with AIDS since 1984.

- Ruth's incredible story has been featured worldwide, including the BBC, National Public Radio, and OUT Magazine.
- Dubbed “St. Ruth” & “The Cemetery Angel”, Ruth's humanitarian efforts and activism span more than 30 years.
- Ruth shares her story throughout the world, with speaking engagements at corporations, non-profit organizations, colleges and universities, government organizations, and more.

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Media: Interviews and Articles



Fighting Fear and Stigma
To Care for AIDS Patients



The Cemetery Angel



Caring for AIDS Patients,
“When No One Else Would”



Meet the Woman Who Cared
for Hundreds of Abandoned
Gay Men Dying of AIDS



Meet The “Cemetery Angel”



Ruth Coker Burks:
Advocate



StoryCorps:
Ruth Coker Burks and Jim
Harwood



Fox News:
“I Would Bury Them in Cookie
Jars”



Waco Tribune-Herald:
Burks Visits Debut of Waco
High Play About Her Work

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Ruth's Story



Ruth Coker Burks, an Arkansas native, is an unlikely advocate for people with AIDS / HIV. A single mom with no background in the medical field, Ruth became involved in the AIDS / HIV crisis because of a chance encounter at the University of Arkansas Medical Center in 1984.

While visiting her friend at the hospital, Ruth noticed a red door and saw nurses drawing straws to determine who would tend to the patient on the other side. Curiosity got the best of her, and she decided to sneak into the room. That is where Ruth met Jimmy, her first AIDS patient. Her life would never be the same after that accidental meeting.

Since then, Ruth has spent over 30 years caring for people who were abandoned by their families and neglected by medical professionals. In the darkest hour of the AIDS epidemic, she cared for and helped bury more than 1,000 people, many of them gay men who had been abandoned by their families.

When she realized she was on her own and "that the cavalry wasn't coming", Ruth found compassionate and like-minded medical professionals and community members to help her care for her "patients". She learned as much as she could about the disease to understand the problems they faced. The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention and the National Institute of Health sent their professionals to investigate how Ruth's patients were living, on average, two years longer than others.

Ruth worked with President Bill Clinton when he was Governor of Arkansas, serving as his informal adviser and as a consultant on HIV/AIDS in the White House during his presidency.

Ruth's message of courage, love and strength continues to inspire other activists. Her goal is to encourage others through her activism and humanitarian efforts by sharing her mantra: Be brave, be of service and be authentic.