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Women For Change

Meet Some Women Who Make Caring Part of their Daily Lives

Bringing Health Services to Those Who Need It Most

Getting To Know the Leaders of LHI

by Michelle B. Good

Lucy Watson and Pat Gandy are partners in life, and partners in leading the Lesbian Health Initiative. LHI is a non-profit organization that works to ensure that women in the GLBT community have access to sensitive and responsible health care. With the help of a collective of caring individuals and organizations, Lucy and Pat have been able to significantly expand the services and the outreach of this very worthwhile organization.

This writer had the pleasure of visiting with these remarkable women to learn more about them and their work with LHI. Here's what they told me:

Pat: "LHI was formed in 1992 by a group of women who were concerned by studies which showed that lesbians were more likely than straight women to get breast cancer. That's

because lesbians are generally less likely to have babies. (Having a baby makes you less likely to get breast cancer.) I joined the organization shortly after it was formed and, in 1994, I became its President. At that time, I was also very involved in politics, and I was a full-time teacher, as well. It soon became obvious that being president of LHI was like having another full-time job. Before long, I gave up the presidency in order to focus on my teaching job and my political activities."

Pat met Lucy in 2001. At that time, Lucy was Secretary of LHI. Lucy caught Pat's eye and, before long, Pat became deeply involved in the organization once again. In 2002, Lucy was asked to run for president of LHI. She said she would take the position if Pat would serve as Secretary. It seems that the two of them make a great team, on both a working level

and a personal level.

Lucy: "I've been involved with LHI since the spring of 1999. At that time, I lived

and promptly became Secretary. In 2001, I was elected President."

Lucy's background is in nursing so she is



Lucy Watson, President, and Pat Gandy, Secretary of LHI. Photo by Gabriel Tran

in Kingwood and I wanted to become more involved in the local GLBT community. I volunteered to work at one of LHI's health fairs. Shortly after that, I was asked to join the Board, which I did,

especially sensitive to the health care needs of women.

Lucy: "It means a lot to me to see women get the help they need. I feel like I'm helping people -- people who

really need help. For women who have very little money and can't afford health care, especially in Texas, there is no safety net. If you can't find private health care or get on the county Gold Card system for health care, you're stuck. The Harris County Hospital District has what they call the Gold Card. If you qualify, then you can get health care through that program. At our health fairs, we offer the paperwork needed to apply for the Gold Card. We also include information in our news letters (which Lucy publishes) on how to apply, and we give the website where they can apply."

Lucy has a special understanding of the plight of women who can't afford health care. She has osteoarthritis in several joints and needs a hip replacement but doesn't have the insurance to cover the high cost of the surgery.

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Pat: *One of the reasons I joined LHI was that I had breast cancer. I've been fortunate to have good health insurance, but when I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I went to a doctor who was obviously uncomfortable with my being a lesbian. His recommendations were very radical. So I consulted an oncologist, Dr. Allene King, whom I'd met through the Houston Women's Group. She presented me with a clearer set of options, with a good chance that I wouldn't need such radical surgery. Sure enough, she did the surgery and the outcome was successful."*

Lucy: *A lot of lesbians don't feel comfortable going to conventional physicians' offices, especially if they will need to reveal their sexual orientation, and there is good reason for their concern. Health care providers are human, and humans can be judgmental and discriminatory. These women want a place where they can go that is safe and non-judgmental, and we provide that.*

Pat: *"Since my background is in education, I get very involved in the educational outreach part of LHI. We distribute a num-*

ber of health-related educational materials at events such as Empower and the Houston Women's Music Festival. We also give talks, participate in panel discussions, and hold safe-sex seminars at places such as The Women's Group, HATCH (Houston Area Teen Coalition of Homosexuals), AssistHers, and the University of Houston at Clear Lake during Breast Cancer Awareness Month."

Pat: *"Lucy is an exceptional president. She just naturally seems*

to know what needs to be done, and she does it. She puts in 40+ hours a week, almost every week, on LHI. It's definitely a full-time job. But thanks to her hard work in writing

grants to obtain funding, we've been able to expand the services that LHI offers. In the past, we were only able to do the health fairs and provide mammograms. Now we're offering blood pressure exams and blood sugar screenings, cholesterol screenings, and bone density tests. When a woman takes advantage of all the tests we offer, she's getting more than \$750 worth of tests. And if she has to go for any follow-up testing,

she'll be getting more than \$1,000 worth of health care. The services we provide are vital for women's health, and in the GLBT community, there is a great need."

LHI offers health fairs twice a year: in June and November. The next one will be held June 4, 2005 in the Montrose Clinic Building, 215 Westheimer.

Lucy: *"A lot of women don't realize that we can provide mammograms at any time of the year -- not just during health fairs. That's one of the ways we've expanded. If a woman needs a mammogram, she just needs to contact us. We provide around 100 mam-*

mograms every year. Sometimes a woman has a mammogram through our program, and the results come back 'positive.' They call us and say, 'What do I do now?' And we're here to help them. We will send them to The Rose (a non-profit breast health organization) and we'll pay for a diagnostic mammogram and an ultrasound.

By that time, perhaps they'll qualify for the county Gold Card or the program at The

Rose where they can get their biopsy done. We'll help them through all of this. We also have connections at M.D. Anderson Hospital so, if it turns out that they do have cancer, we'll do everything we can to help get them into M.D. Anderson."

Lucy: *"We have a lot of clients who come back year after year. We often receive cards and letters from people we've helped. Some of them say, 'You saved my life!' I guess maybe we do because, if we didn't provide this service, they probably wouldn't have gotten a diagnosis soon enough and they wouldn't have gotten the life-saving treatment they needed."*

At LHI's 2005 Valentine Gala, Dr. Allene King will be officially recognized for her contributions to the community. To learn more about the Valentine Gala, and the services and activities of the Lesbian Health Initiative, check them out on the web at: www.lhihouston.org

To contact the LHI, call 713 603-0023, or send an email to: lhi@lhihouston.org

Attend LHI's Valentine Gala
Saturday, February 12, 2005
6:30 pm to 12:30 am
Warwick Hotel in Houston

- Entertainment by comedienne Suzanne Westenhoefer
- Dinner and dance
- Silent auction and raffle
- Mardi Gras theme (masks optional)

Tickets: \$75 per seat. Purchase individually or as table of ten. The Warwick is offering a special package room rate with breakfast, if you'd like to stay overnight. For reservations/ticket purchase, call: 713 603-0023 or email: lhi@lhihouston.org