



Florence Seurig, above, began raising money for AIDS organizations after her son, Michael, died from the disease in 1991. — Kenneth Partridge photo

*Red Ribbon founder Florence Seurig is*

# Fund raising to remember

**By Kenneth Partridge**  
Staff Reporter

In the 12 or so years since Florence Seurig began raising money for AIDS organizations, she's only come across a few women who, like her, have lost children to the disease.

For the most part, she said, they haven't wanted to talk about their experiences.

"I think there's a feeling there's not much

you can do," she said. "People want to forget."

Though Ms. Seurig admits to having similar impulses after her son, Michael, died from AIDS in 1991, she eventually opted to go in another direction and make something positive of her personal tragedy.

"You make choices when you have a great loss," said the retired interior designer, who now spends much of her time creating abstract clay sculptures. "You can lie

down and die, or you can choose to live. I chose to live."

The idea to begin fund raising, she said, came about as she was preparing to celebrate her 60th birthday. While the occasion was supposed to be a joyous one, she found herself thinking about her son.

"What do you do when you want to celebrate living, but you don't feel like celebrating?" she remembered asking herself.

What she did was put together "Jazz for

AIDS,” a night of music and dancing that culminated with a concert at Greenwich Library.

By the end of the show, which went past midnight, she said, people were dancing in the aisles, sweating off the dinners they’d eaten hours earlier at local restaurants that were generous enough to donate their meals at cost.

“It seemed like a good way to have a birthday,” Ms. Seurig said.

The event raised about \$37,000 — a huge amount — or so Ms. Seurig and her husband, Karl, thought. In years since, she said, she’s learned that by spending a little more money on putting together a fund-raising event, the profits can be even higher.

Soon after the show, the organization, then called Jazz for AIDS, formed a board of directors, and its second event, held at the State University of New York at Purchase, brought in about \$100,000.

While this marked a big increase from the first event, Ms. Seurig said the agency didn’t really hit its stride until Bonnie Levinson, the wife of her son’s best friend, joined the board. Ms. Levinson knew many people in town, and as a result, the organization’s ability to raise money grew tenfold.

“My candy store mentality became a Saks Fifth Avenue mentality,” Ms. Seurig said.

The board, bolstered by several of Ms. Levinson’s equally well-connected friends, voted to change the name of the organization to the Red Ribbon Foundation, and from there, Ms. Seurig said, things “skyrocketed.”

The foundation now holds fund-raising events every two years, she said, with the last one bringing in about \$500,000. Looking ahead to the next one, board members have their sights set on doubling that figure and moving into seven-figure territory.

“It’s beyond my realm of comprehension,” said Ms. Seurig, who, by her own admission, is no great socialite or networking pro. Much of the credit for the foundation’s growth, she said, belongs to members of the board, who have tapped into the wealth and generosity of Greenwich residents and collected more than \$1 million to date.

Through the years, the foundation has given grants to a variety of organizations working with AIDS. Some provide care for people suffering from the disease, while others are working to develop new drugs.

Ms. Seurig said things have come a long



**Ms. Seurig models a thin leather and sterling silver bracelet, which will be introduced at an October fund-raiser. — Kenneth Partridge photo**

way since her son was diagnosed. Back then, she said, people in communities such as Greenwich didn’t talk about the disease, many believing it was the kind of illness that only infected intravenous drug users.

“There was a stigma attached,” she said.

In the early days after Michael died, Ms. Seurig said she found support organizations like Bread & Roses to be extremely helpful. The group is one to which the Red Ribbon Foundation now gives money.

Each year, she said, the foundation receives written funding applications from more than a dozen organizations. The board then meets, whittles the list down and makes its choices, with one member serving as an “angel” to each organization, keeping tabs on it throughout the year.

Ms. Seurig served as the angel for Stamford Cares, which used its gift several years ago to bring the AIDS Memorial Quilt — an ever-growing work comprising thousands of panels sewn by family members and friends of AIDS victims — to the area.

“It was very touching,” she said, recalling that several of the families involved in Stamford Cares got a chance to create their own squares. “It crossed all economic levels. That was unusual.”

In addition to raising money, Ms. Seurig said she’d like to do more to heighten awareness of the disease and stress prevention among young people, possibly through programs at local high schools. She said

parents should talk more with their kids about sex and the dangers of promiscuity.

Still, she admits, prevention likely won’t be enough to eradicate AIDS entirely.

“That’s not going to solve this, unless you get rid of kids’ desire to have sex,” she said. “It’s the world. It’s the computer, the television we’re used to. If they were as exposed to prevention as they are sex, maybe there’d be a chance.”

In the meantime, she said, the foundation will continue to put on bigger and better events. The next one, scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 27, at the Capitol Theater in Port Chester, N.Y., will feature cocktails, dinner and the B-52s, famed for their tunes such as “Love Shack” and “Rock Lobster.”

At the event, foundation members plan to introduce a new bracelet designed by local jeweler and board member Steven Fox. The piece, intended for both men and women, features a sterling silver ribbon that’s held to the wrist with a thin red leather band.

“We wanted to make it unusual, but at the same time respect what the ribbon stands for,” Ms. Seurig said.

Like the foundation itself, the bracelet is a reminder that AIDS is a real problem that affects real people — something Ms. Seurig said she’s always thinking of, even if, at times, it’s difficult.

“I never want to forget,” she said.

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