interview

WRITTEN BY Jack Coraggio • PHOTOGRAPHED BY Laurie Gaboardi



t'll be just another tea party at the Washington Depot home of Gael Hammer and Gary Goodwin. They hold it every summer, this intimate encounter for themselves and a few hundred of their closest friends.

Dubbed "Tea for Two Hundred," and now in its 14th year, the annual gala has evolved over the past decade-and-almost-a-half into a local institution, a gathering that attracts to their quaint country property scores of people from Washington, elsewhere in Connecticut and New England, and beyond.

Guests come for the gorgeous garden, for the music, the silent auction (vacation rentals, CBS studio tour, a plane ride and much more) and the best hat contest, and they come for the special celebrity guest. But more than all that, they come to contribute to one exceedingly worthy though seemingly fading cause: AIDS relief.

Tea Time for a Good Cause

A Gorgeous Garden, MUSIC AND MORE HELP RAISE FUNDS To Fight AIDS



"The main thrust for AIDS [awareness] was in the '80s and '90s; now people have slackened concern," Mr. Hammer, a broker with Klemm Real Estate, lamented. "But the amount of new cases each year is still staggering."

In 2009, 35,000 people in the U.S. were newly diagnosed as HIV positive, according to the Center for Disease Control. Perhaps more alarmingly, that year an estimated 20,000 more

contracted it and remain unaware. In fact, that's pretty much the case every year.

As it is, more than one million Americans are HIV positive, and approximately one in five among them has no idea. Sustained awareness is crucial; to push AIDS from the forefront could be reckless.

Maybe that's the reason Tea for Two Hundred over the years has generated \$700,000 for charities related to the cause, and still maintains its popularity. It's a good time, for sure; there's wine and entertainment, everyone dresses in white, and this year the Connecticut Gay Men's Chorus will perform and Mia Farrow will serve as honorary chair, ▶ 22



Above, co-host Gael Hammer last year with hat contest participant Kate Sileo. Below left, Stephen Calcagni and August Sack; below right, Claudio Lameira and Laura Daly.





◆ 21 even though she may be in Darfur that day.

But that fun can't mask how vital and worthwhile the event is.

Whatever the people's motivation for coming, sometimes it baffles even Mr. Hammer and Mr. Goodwin how big it has become.

"I just had no idea it would continue to grow like this," said Mr. Hammer. "It's taken on a life of its own. People plan their vacations around it, and if they miss it they are really upset with themselves."

This year the Interfaith AIDS Ministry [IAM] of Greater Danbury and the New Milford VNA Hospice will share the proceeds. They are both vital in assisting those stricken by a disease that is specific to no race, creed, color, class, country or sexual orientation.

Given the event's continuing success, there should be a lot of proceeds to share. The organizers hope that about 400 people will attend. Indeed, they should rename it "Tea for Two Hundred Times Two." One year the party saw 600 guests, and in one fell swoop raised \$90,000.

"Now people say jokingly it should be called 'Tea for Two Thousand," continued Mr. Hammer.

But the intent of the fund-raiser is nothing to laugh about. This is the seventh time—the third year in a row—that IAM has been involved in the event, though first time for the New Milford VNA Hospice.

IAM is a low-key nonprofit operation in Danbury that offers various support programs -many based around the nutritional, physical and spiritual challenges associated with the terminal illness-to people with AIDS and their loved ones. Their clientele often are drawn from low-income families with few means, many of whom rely on the agency's Living Pantry program to feed themselves and their families.

The Living Pantry provides produce, dairy, meat, staples, juices and personal hygiene products to the needy, and is funded through the City of Danbury, the state Department of Public Health, Broadway Cares and pharmaceutical company Boehringer Ingelheim. But funds are still greatly needed.

"It's a big part of their annual budget," said Mr. Hammer. "We trust the people in charge to make the right decisions, and it's always a struggle to get funding from the govern-





Top, MOMIX dancers performing at last year's Tea for Two Hundred. Above, from left, MOMIX founder Moses Pendleton, Linda Allard and Gael Hammer.







Far left, from left, Frank Lucchesi, Dave Hay, Dave Cash and Greg Bonin last year. ment." organized the food for Tea said Linda Lewis, Hospice Middle, Linda Allard, Mary Adams and Miriam Duncan. Right, Kristen Carelle.

Michael Greene, the director of Operations & Direct Care Services for the nonprofit IAM, can't deny that. Though thankful to all agencies that contribute, fund-raising events such as this keep the operation afloat in these troubled economic waters.

"This is our biggest fund-raiser, this is major for us," he said. "It gives us the chance to reach out to the community, to let them know we still exist."

IAM serves 565 families affected by AIDS, though infected cases are probably much higher. As he typically only works with low-income families, it's hard to get a grasp on the true figure.

That unknown is troubling to him, as is the stigma still associated with the disease, the fact that more than 100,000 young Americans live with it unwittingly and the diminishing focus in this country on AIDS.

"Everything bothers me with AIDS," said Mr. Greene, whose group has for Two Hundred.

He's not bothered by Lady Gaga, but actually thrilled by her use of her pop diva status to again raise public consciousness about AIDS.

Then there's the nonprofit Hospice, whose

'This is major for us."

mission is to improve the quality of life for patients toward the end of their lives through well trained support workers who assst primary caregivers. That association was how Mr. Hammer became familiar with the effort, and it speaks to the entire event's impetus.

In 1995 the New Milford VNA Hospice cared for Mr. Hammer's late partner, Timothy Mawson, then dving of AIDS. It was after his death that Tea for Two Hundred was begun.

"We are so honored to be asked to join this year," director, "It's wonderful to be included. Our service is homecare-based, a family service, not just for cancer but any terminal illness."

Many people don't realize that, or that Hospice also assists in the bereavement process. They also don't know how much help these agencies need to stay solvent, and to continue their good works.

Tea for Two Hundred will be held at the River Road home of Mr. Hammer and Mr. Goodwin from 4 to 7 p.m. on Saturday, July 30. Mr. Goodwin said the event will be held rain or shine, save for a hurricane. But Deborah Luongo, the business development manager at New Milford VNA Hospice said the weather will be beautiful. Certainly it will be a beautiful day, whatever the weather.

Tickets for the event are \$50 per person, and can be obtained, along with further information, through the Web site at www. teafortwohundred.org/. Guests can also buy tickets at the door, but be sure to wear white.