

Story by Deborah Davis • Photos by Luis Sanchez Saturno • The New Mexican



Dana Rice of Santa Fe walks his dog in the rail yard. Rice and six other people will perform monologues about their experiences with AIDS.

AIDS MONOLOGUES

As the number of people with HIV grows across the country, so does the need for compassion and storytelling



Rice hangs out at his house before taking his dogs Ned, front and Sissy, back, for a walk around the neighborhood. Rice says the monologue workshops have prompted him to reflect on the beauty of his life.

“The methodology they use forces you to strip away any self-editing. I found myself exposing some deep stuff but also found the humor in my life.”

DANA RICE

referring to the writing workshops that led to the monologues

If you go ...

What: The AIDS Monologues
When: Friday and Saturday, 7:30 p.m.
Where: Center for Contemporary Arts, 1050 Old Pecos Trail
Cost: \$12 and \$10 for students and seniors.
For reservations, call 986-4742.

In the end, janitors were left to put IVs in Frederick Kelly's veins as he lay dying in the basement of a Texas hospital.

Kelly's oldest son, Todd, was the one who shaved his dad's face and emptied his bed pan when nurses and doctors were too afraid to touch someone who was dying of cancers and infections related to AIDS.

He saw his father courageously accept his death and the discrimination he endured as a gay man and an AIDS patient. Eighteen years after his father's death, Todd Kelly has a chance to tell his father's story, the blessings he shared with the world and his painful end.

Todd Kelly, who has lived in Santa Fe for eight years, is crafting a 10-minute piece that he will present as one of six performers in *The AIDS Monologues* on Friday and Saturday. Santa Feans have embraced the Life Monologue Project since Pamela Thompson and her former business partner, Tanya Taylor, developed the idea in 2000.

There have been monologue performances about cancer, AIDS, Sept. 11, 2001, and most recently, pets. Last year, Thompson and Wayne Carroll conducted workshops in major cities across the country, introducing the unique method of promoting healing through self-expression to health-care professionals and their patients.

Thompson wants to tell stories about how people have been affected by AIDS because while the number of people with HIV continues to grow across the country, there are many people who don't know anyone who has the virus—or don't know that they know someone. A previous performer told her he had HIV for 13 years, and his monologue was the first time he told anyone.

"Some of his best friends didn't even know he had been through this. That is so upsetting to me," she said. "People aren't reaching out and getting help

AIDS

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I think that's one of the greatest things that comes out of this."

Thompson helps people develop their story by a series of workshops that requires them to write about various subjects.

She emphasizes free writing — writing without stopping or editing. The phrase, "I remember," made Dana Rice think of his first lover, the person who infected him with HIV 23 years ago. He thought about the things he couldn't remember, the sound of his lover's laugh or the way he smelled.

"The methodology they use forces you to strip away any self-editing," Rice said. "I found myself exposing some deep stuff but also found the humor in my life. It's black humor, but most people with HIV have had to use black humor as a way to deal with it."

During the first weekend of workshops, people laughed as much as they cried, reflecting on their loved ones' deaths and also celebrating their lives.

"There is a life and a passion and creativity in the gay community that has been so devastated by AIDS, but I also wanted to tap into the joy and life of that community," Thompson said. "It's also a legacy piece, a tribute to amazing, wonderful people we've lost. To bring them into the room is what I really want so we can see the face of the disease."

Rice experienced such grief over his friends' deaths that he burned some of the pictures he couldn't stand looking at anymore.

"Part of me regrets that, but it's what I needed to do," he said. "This workshop is bringing me back to some of those people again."

The workshop brought Jeff Fenton back to a turning point in his life that occurred 12 years ago. He was asked to write about the word *surrender*. Suddenly he was standing in front of his bathroom mirror filled with self-loathing and holding a razor, ready to end his life.

His saw his sister and two brothers in the reflection. They were still grieving for their

mother, who had died of cancer. The razor fell to the floor.

"That's when everything changed," he said.

He became determined to stop hating himself. On 25 sticky notes, he wrote something good about himself and tucked them away throughout his house. Whenever he found one, he repeated the words out loud until he genuinely believed them.

"I like sharing that moment because everyone struggles with being OK with ourselves," he said. "We look for affirmation from others, but we need that from ourselves."

Fenton is used to telling his stories in front of schoolchildren, but he's looking forward to a different venue, an evening of compassion and storytelling.

"Everyone wants to hear a story that engages them," he said. "It's why we pick up books or go to movies. We want to get enveloped in something magical, and the Life Monologues are magical."

For the performers, the monologues can be life changing. It has allowed Kelly to work through his issues concerning gay families, discrimination and AIDS and also reminded him of important lessons his father taught him.

"It's bringing up sadness to be healed and released," he said. "I realized he made the best of it. It's a gift he gave me that I was not aware of at the time."

Kelly knows people's beliefs and attitudes about AIDS have improved since the time his dad was put in the hospital's basement next to the laundry. But maybe his dad's story will prompt people to think about other discrimination that still goes on today.

"The reality of the matter is somewhere people are experiencing what my father did. It's still real, and I can open it up for people so they can look at their issues and not be afraid," he said.

The workshops prompted Rice to reflect on the beauty of his life.

"I so appreciate what I have," Rice said. "I've seen HIV take so much from so many but not me. I've beat the odds a long time ago. This is just dessert."