

ON CHRISTMAS EVE OF 1988, I picked up my son Steve at the airport. He always kept himself in good shape, but he was so skinny it was really beyond the pale. I didn't say anything, but Christmas morning I asked him, "Are you right?"

He said, "No, actually, I'm not well at all." At first, he said he had Kaposi sarcoma, which is a manifestation of AIDS. You see, he didn't want to say the word. Finally he said, "When I was at UCLA I got this virus."

Now I knew it was AIDS.

We were devastated. And in my case, it was followed by months of depression. Oh, my God. I was so tired all the time. I was trying to hide my depression, too, and that was killing me. And as I thought

through it, I said, "I've got to do something with this." I decided to tell my Rotary club. I wanted to see if we could get an education and awareness program going.

My kids were dead set against it. They wanted to protect Steve. His concern was the stigma associated with AIDS. But I kept going back to him. I said, "If we could save a life or two, wouldn't that make it worth it?" I said, "Anyone who really cares about us will support us." He finally bought into the idea.

The day I was going to tell the club, it felt a little lonely. I didn't know what the response would be. But here's the thing: I didn't care. I had to tell them about my son.

Because of my background in athletics, I sort of treated it as "game day." I knew what the game plan was. I didn't want to go into some big melodramatic scene. I just wanted to tell my story and

dents of our club. One of them was so ultra-conservative he made Attila the Hun look like a flaming liberal.

And you know the amazing thing? Telling that secret got rid of my depression almost immediately. What a relief it was! I don't think I ever told that group what they did. Not only did they launch the Los Altos Rotary AIDS Project. They eliminated my depression. I'd gone six months trying to hide those feelings, six months carrying around this secret. No one should have to carry something that heavy alone – not those afflicted by AIDS or their loved ones. Steve died in November 1989.

Six months after I told my story, another member of our club, a very popular member, stood up at a meeting and announced that he had AIDS. That really won over a lot of the doubting Thomases.



tell your club your secret

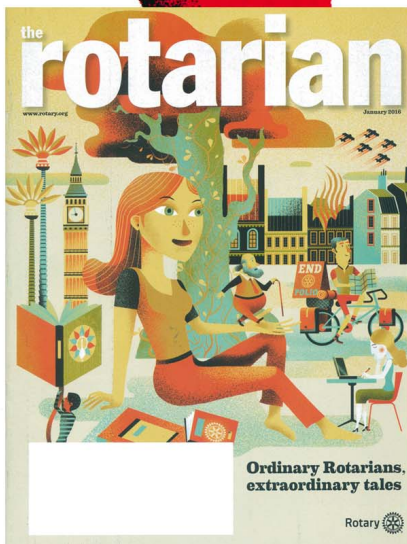
DUSHAN "DUDE" ANGIUS
Rotary Club of Los Altos, Calif.

ask if there would be interest in setting up an AIDS task force.

I got up and spoke, and really I'm kind of amazed that I didn't choke up when I mentioned Steve's name. No quivering chin. When I told everyone that I had a son who had AIDS, there was a collective gasp. Guys like me don't have kids who get AIDS. That was the perception. So, yeah, I guess that shocked them. I could see it in their faces.

If no one had come forward to volunteer for the task force, I think I would have died. But thank God, people did. They came up to me in tears. We had some very important people step forward, including most of the past presi-

After I told my story, a lot of people came up to the podium and told me what a gutty call it had been. I said, "Anybody with a soul would have done the same thing." They didn't believe me. But it's true. — *As told to Steve Almond*



Learn more about the
Los Altos Rotary AIDS Project at
www.rotaryaidsproject.org

The Rotarian Action Group for
Family Health & AIDS Prevention
is also working on this issue.
Find out more at
www.rffa.org