

DEMETER

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Women and AIDS

By Rosemary Regello

(This is the first of a two-part series on the impact of AIDS on women.)

"A frequent response is shock and disbelief. There is a period of time where there is numbness . . . They equate AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) with death."

Flo Elyon, one of many women active in the fight against the

lines of a war," Elyon said recently. "It's very difficult when the statistics start becoming people."

Elyon began working for the Shanti Project two years ago and serves as volunteer coordinator for the group, which occupies seven rooms on the second floor of the Pride Center at Hayes and Fillmore streets in San Francisco.

"The women in the organization

clients each month, along with an equal number of friends, lovers and relatives, who she calls "the worried well."

"The number of people who are rallying and the impact on the gay community has been really profound," Elyon said, adding, "I would like to think that if something like this happens in the women's community, it would get as much attention."

Elyon was unaware of any cases of women with AIDS on the West Coast. However, "There have been women diagnosed with AIDS on the East Coast. The majority have been lovers with IV drug users or Haitians," she said.

According to Pat Norman, coordinator of Gay and Lesbian Health Services for the city of San Francisco, women have expressed some concern about the epidemic. Women call in, she said, because their husbands have had homosexual experiences or they themselves have had contact with gay men. Other women ask about whether or not it's safe for their children to spend time with their gay fathers. Norman reassures them that AIDS cannot be passed

through casual contact.

Lesbians ask about the risk of artificial insemination with gay men. This question is a little harder to answer, Norman said. Because no tests exist which can distinguish AIDS carriers from healthy subjects, she can only advise lesbians to wait until the "source" of AIDS is discovered. At this point, she said, "There's no information about anything."

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growing epidemic, was describing the reaction of people with AIDS upon receiving their diagnosis. As a staff member for the Shanti Project, a counseling center for people facing life-threatening illnesses, she has witnessed the heavy toll AIDS has taken on the Bay Area gay community.

"I often feel like I'm in the front

have a pretty powerful presence," she said, when asked about women's involvement in the AIDS crisis. Five of the 11 staff members are women, as are 23 of about 85 volunteers who counsel AIDS-related clients.

Elyon said that the project has worked with over 200 people with AIDS since 1981, serving 15-20