

# Hands-On

## SAN FRANCISCO'S POSITIVE BEING CELEBRATES TEN YEARS OF PROVIDING HEALING BODYWORK TO LOW-INCOME PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV

by Brent Calderwood

PHOTOS BY STEVEN UNDERHILL

Certified massage therapist Bill Stern, PhD, founded Positive Being three years after he nearly died of complications from AIDS in 1996. “After several close calls, I started seeing a massage therapist regularly,” recalled Stern. “The fact that someone was willing to touch me with loving and healing hands made a huge difference.”

With a handful of other volunteers, Stern opened Positive Being’s low-cost massage clinic for people with AIDS in January 2001. Today, Stern mobilizes and manages a volunteer team of certified massage therapists and other bodyworkers who donate at least one hour per month to treating Positive Being’s clients.

The story of Positive Being is the story of Bill Stern, who still serves as executive director, although, he says, “We’re currently searching for a new executive director who wants to bring their passion and skills to the job.”

Stern’s sunny garden apartment is nestled on the ground floor of a modest Victorian in San Francisco’s Mission District, the city’s predominantly Latino neighborhood, at the heart of the famously foggy city’s “sun belt” and cheek-by-jowl with the Castro and South of Market neighborhoods.

As serious as Stern has had to be about his non-profit work, he’s disarmingly light-hearted and open in person, and his apartment is clearly the home of an art lover and academic, overflowing with books about health and HIV, art history, alternative medicine, anatomy, and world travel. What walls aren’t lined with books are decorated with works of art by

friends and lovers, many of whom he’s seen pass away over the years; it’s the perfect setting to sit down with a mug of Earl Grey and delve into the long and fascinating journey that brought Stern and Positive Being to where they are today.

“I started showing symptoms [of having HIV] when I was working on my dissertation at UCSB in the nineties. First, I got PCP—the pneumonia, not the drug,” he jokes. “Then it was MAC [a blood disease], then other opportunistic infections followed. I worked as a teacher for as long as I could, making it through two bouts of pneumonia, but then I had to go out on disability.”

After his diagnosis in 1994, Stern decided to move from Santa Barbara to San Francisco, “where the healthcare was infinitely better,” he says.

“Shortly after moving to San Francisco, I began the first of two long courses of chemotherapy. I was also advised to enter a drug trial, [which I did] with disastrous results: I started losing my eyesight.”

Stern was still working on his dissertation at the time, in art history, “which is totally based on visual analysis,” he explains. “I knew I was in trouble. But I finished up my PhD by dictating the last few chapters of my dissertation.”

Anyone who has gone to graduate school, let alone gotten their PhD, knows how grueling the several years of austere student life can be. But add to that the prospect that when it’s all over, you won’t be able

Bill Stern and two bodywork volunteers



# Healing





to practice in your chosen field, and you'll get a sense of the resiliency and determination that went into the formation of Positive Being.

But that resiliency didn't happen overnight. "I had no career, no purpose. I couldn't read, I couldn't drive, and I could barely walk. I was bitter about my visual disability, so I asked a friend, 'Know any jobs you can do by feel?'"

Although Stern's question was sarcastically rhetorical, his friend immediately suggested massage. "It was a light dawning on the clouded mind—here was something I could do!"

By the end of 1999, Stern was certified in Swedish and Deep Tissue massage from a program that had involved studying with Irene Smith, a pioneer in the use of massage in hospice and hospitals.

"That's basically how Positive Being was born. I had a new business, a new

title—executive director—and, honestly, a new reason for living." Positive Being opened its doors January 1, 2001.

Stern's story may sound like an isolated incident to some, or a "miracle story" of recovery from terminal illness. "But it isn't," he maintains. For one thing, his health problems haven't magically gone away; in the past ten years he's had to contend with two hip replacements, a heart attack, and a broken foot due to osteopenia, a bone density condition, all before turning fifty in 2007.

By the first years of the new millennium, there were populations who'd been living with HIV/AIDS for well over twenty years, and doctors had realized that long-term HIV can cause premature aging—"just what every gay man wants!" Stern adds. "But despite all those physical problems, my social and spiritual life grew, and so did Positive Being."

Stern believes that the overall improvements in his sense of happiness and well-being have come not just from the therapeutic effects of massage, which are well-documented, but also from the compassionate human contact that bodyworkers provide.

Bodywork, he explains, can serve as a model for offering and accepting physical affection in the "real world" outside of the clinical setting. "Our goal at Positive Being goes beyond nurturing a client's sense of integration with his own body, mind and spirit, but also with others."

For many patients and caregivers searching for alternatives to a purely Western-medical approach, Positive Being has been a godsend—some clients have called it a lifesaver. But Stern is quick to add, "These aims serve as a complement, rather than an alternative, to drug therapies."

Whereas pharmaceuticals function by negating the virus, the programs of Positive Being function by affirming the positive aspects and healing potential within our own bodies. This approach has struck a chord with clients who not only crave loving physical touch, but have often felt beleaguered by impersonal clinical therapies and the damaging side effects of toxic drugs.

In 2007, Stern began organizing an ongoing series of workshops along with therapist John Olesen, now the clinical supervisor of San Francisco's Shanti L.I.F.E. Program. According to Olesen, "The workshops help people listen through their hands."

Called "Exploring the Body Positive" the workshops are held at Wildwood Retreat Center, tucked into the forested mountains along the Russian River, just over an hour's drive north of San Francisco.

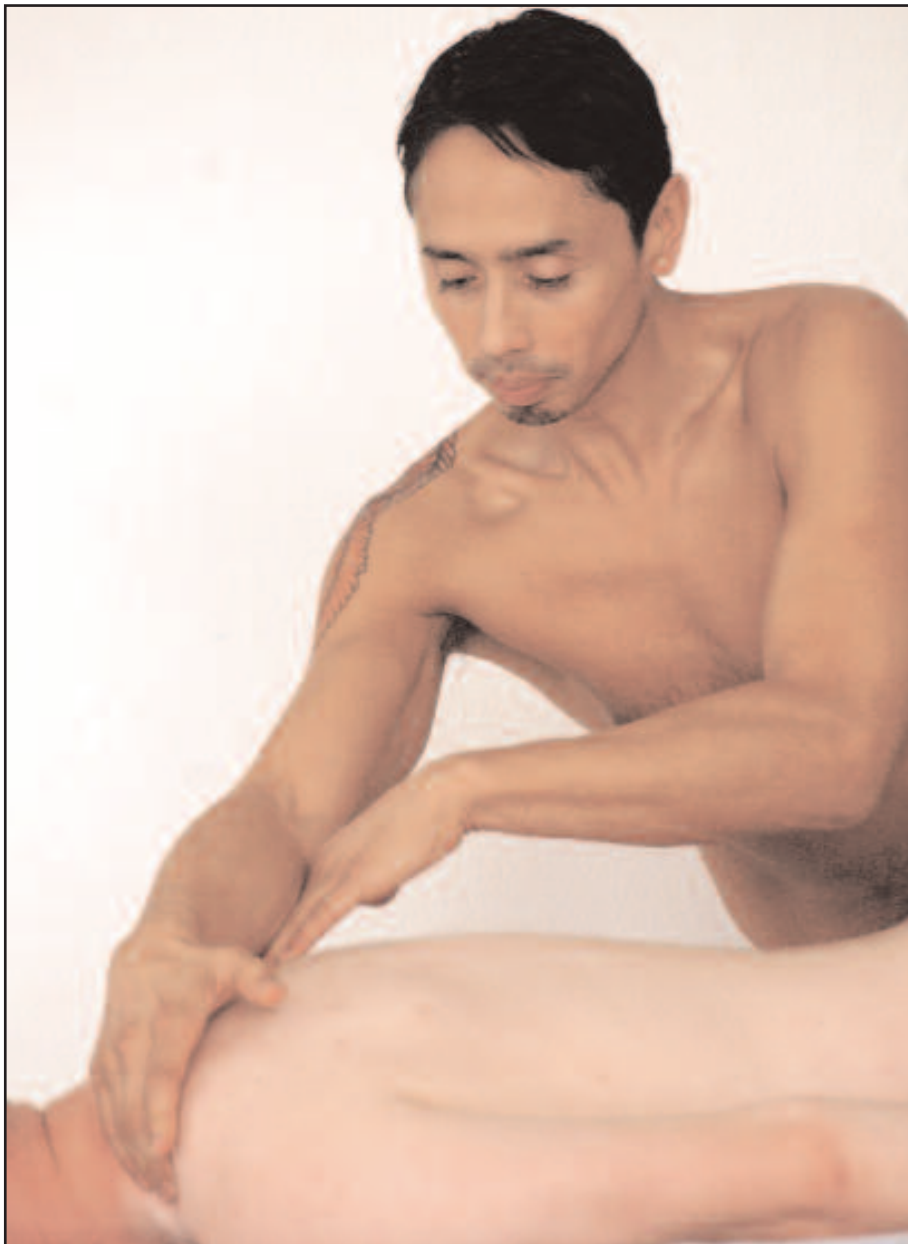
"I work a lot with stress reduction," Olesen tells me, "and I saw how stress was harmful to HIV-positive men. In addition to the bodywork, which is different from massage and is purely non-sexual, we also do walks, meditations, and breathing exercises, so people can get in touch with breath, listen to their bodies, learn to accept and like their bodies—which not only helps with self-esteem, it helps the immune system.

"A lot of long-term survivors have felt untouchable," Olesen continues. "They remember how it was when people had to suit up, and didn't know how it was transmitted, when it was GRID and gay cancer. You can intellectually understand that you're touchable and lovable and great, but your body has to learn that, too."

In its mission to make Positive Being's services accessible to everyone, especially the low-income people and clients of color who now account for a disproportionate number of new seroconversions in San Francisco and worldwide, Positive Being also sponsors the annual benefit concert "Positively Touching," featuring a cast of local celebs and musical performers on tour with traveling Broadway shows.

Artistic director Sean Ray has been producing the cabaret, which is presented every October at the Rrazz Room, a nightclub just off Union Square, since 2001.

After Ray moved to San Francisco in



1999 and began performing in Bay Area musical theater productions, he met singers he bonded with and who shared his passion. "Then in August of 2000, I tested HIV-positive," says Ray. "Being affected so personally gave me the final push to make the singing group happen, which I'd wanted to put together for years." Members of this group form the core of the the annual "Positively Touching" benefits.

"During my ten years with the New York City Gay Men's Chorus," Ray recounted, "I lost many friends and was singing at memorial services all the time. I am so pleased and honored to be a part of this. And the singers and musicians I'm able to assemble each year give so much of themselves—time-wise

and talent-wise. They're great people who are also trying to make a difference for others. And actually, that's true of everyone who volunteers for Positive Being."

Additional information and quotes provided by Eric Jansen.

For more information on Steven Underhill Photography, visit [www.stevenunderhill.com](http://www.stevenunderhill.com).

For more information about Positive Being, visit [www.positivebeing.org](http://www.positivebeing.org).

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