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Light From a Dark Room' puts a face on AIDS statistics

Writer Perry Tilleraas, left, with photographer Terry Brown.

Photo/ Michal Daniel for KTCA

If doctors said you had an disease you probably couldn't survive, you might, like the terminally ill protagonist of the old TV series "Run for Your Life," embark on a globe-trotting adventure, trying to cram a lifetime of experience into what time you had left.

Or, you could do something really daring: You could try harder to be yourself.

The latter approach is an underlying theme of "Artists and AIDS: Light From a Dark Room," an inspirational KTCA-Channel 2 documentary coming up Wednesday at 8 p.m.

"Light From a Dark Room" profiles and presents samples of the work of several Twin Cities artists — writers, actors, photographers — who are living with

Television/Noel Holston

AIDS. Not dying of AIDS, for death comes only in a final instant, but living with the virus with courage, grace and even humor.

Most of the artistic works featured were commissioned by Arts Over AIDS, a consortium of 40 Twin Cities arts organizations whose mission is to alter the often-negative perceptions of AIDS and thus to create an environment more conducive to winning the fight against AIDS.

Perry Tilleraas sets the program's positive tone with a disarming anecdote about getting commissioned to compile "The Circle of Hope," a book about people in the "AIDS/HIV community" who overcame the chemical addictions and related self-esteem problems that he believes made them more susceptible to the virus.

"I was talking to my brother, and I told him that they were looking for someone who had some AIDS experience, and I did," Tilleraas says. "They were looking for a recovering alcoholic who understood 12-step programs, and I did. And they were looking for someone who is gay, and I am.

"He turned to me and he said, 'It's amazing what you have to do to get a job these days.' "

The documentary speaks to an audience much larger than the AIDS/HIV community. It speaks to all of us as we confront the same fate with different timetables.

Actor-singer Aeren Thomas says creating and performing his one-man show "God Save the Queen," in which he explores how he has been affected by being gay and having AIDS, helped him resolve conflicts that had plagued him all his life.

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Thomas has painful memories of a boyhood when he felt so different, isolated and alone that he would pray to God either to heal him or to strike him dead. Being open and frank on stage helped him feel worthy of other people's love and respect for the first time in his life.

"I would hope that would have happened if I hadn't become HIV-positive and had to deal with all this, but I don't know that it would have," Thomas says.

Patrick Scully is a dancer, performance artist and member of the Radical Faeries, a group of street performers who are gay in both senses of the term. Scully was 31 when he tested HIV-positive, and though he is still without AIDS symptoms five years later, the knowledge that he could start exhibiting them any day has changed his outlook.

"It's like having a deadline," Scully tells producer Barbara Wiener. "Deadlines make you get things done."

Scully's "Too Soon Gone" is brilliant in concept and affecting in presentation. In this eulogistic monologue, he draws parallels between depersonalized statistics about AIDS victims and the city of Minneapolis' actions to raze Block E downtown.

"The choice on the part of the city to call it 'Block E' makes it a faceless place," Scully explains to Wiener. "Nobody identifies with something called Block E. You may have a response to the Best Steak House or Shinders or the Great Northern Market or Moby Dick's or any of those places where real people go and sit down and have a drink or buy a magazine or whatever. 'Block E' is just a statistic."

Scully had lived in the area as a child and rented a studio there as an adult. In "Too Soon Gone," he describes characteristics of the buildings that most people never noticed, such as the richly carved woodwork on the second and third floors of an old residence hotel that had become the home of a Shinder's newsstand.

Wearing a ministerial dark suit, he stands before a large TV screen on which flickers film footage of the demolition in progress. One by one, he makes the Block E buildings distinct, makes them come alive. He links each anecdote about a building to a story about someone he knew, someone distinct and alive, who became an AIDS statistic.

"The face of AIDS needs to be made more personal," Scully says.

Whether "Light From a Dark Room" is featuring his work or Thomas' work, poignant readings from Tilleraas' book or pictures shot by a class of HIV-positive amateur photographers, that is exactly what it accomplishes.

Too Soon Lost Review