

## local news

# Service matches homeowners with homeseekers

Program gives companionship, financial help to people with HIV

By CHRISTOPHER SEELY

Living alone in the city isn't always easy in Atlanta with its sky-high rental prices, especially on the income a disability check provides, according to Alan Huggins.

Huggins, collecting disability after being diagnosed with HIV 17 years ago, started looking to move back inside Atlanta's perimeter about six months ago.

Aside from the monthly rental hike, the move made absolute sense.

"All my friends are in town, everything I do is in town — there wasn't any sense in living outside the city," he said. "I was in the city every day, commuting way too much."

Huggins supplements his disability check with handyman work in his time off from volunteering with Project Open Hand, where he worked as a chef for 23 years.

When AID Atlanta alerted Huggins to Home But Not Alone, his desire to pay low rent in a gay, HIV-friendly home became a reality.

Home But Not Alone links a homeowner with a home seeker, a free service with several benefits, according to Susan Big, a



*Editor's note: Every week throughout the holiday season, Southern Voice highlights a charity organization that lends a hand to gay people and embodies the spirit of giving by Helping Out. E-mail editor@sovo.com with suggestions for future profiles.*

housing counselor for the program sponsored by the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta.

"It's affordable housing for the home seeker and additional income for the home provider," she said.

One roommate in the match must be HIV-positive, and both often are, Big said. Home seekers and home providers reap emotional benefits from living with someone who shares the same HIV status, she said.

"It stabilizes people, provides companionship, and maintains a culture where people are more comfortable living with someone else who is HIV-positive," she said. "People understand why you are taking the pills, and when you are not feeling good [they understand] why you are not feeling good."

Fred Willett leases an apartment in Ansley Park, where he has lived with Huggins and their two cats and two dogs for the past six months.

He sought a roommate through Home But Not Alone in March 2001, after his partner died from complications of AIDS in November 2000.

"It is lonely living alone with nobody to talk to and I had a two bedroom unit, so I thought maybe I should contact one of

these services," Willett said.

He contacted Big to inquire about Home But Not Alone, and three days later she arrived at his apartment to begin the screening process, Willett said.

In a month's span, Big fields about 150 phone inquiries. Out of those 150 phone calls, she interviews roughly 25 people, both home providers and home seekers, she said, ultimately making 10 matches per month.

"From her knowledge of what she had available and what she had just got from interviewing me, she was able to match me up with different people to view apartments," Huggins said.

Home But Not Alone offers seekers and providers pointers for topics of discussion when they meet each other to ensure compatibility.

Mainly, potential housemates just need to work out the "nitty gritty" details like "use of telephone, smoking or non-smoking, pets, pet care, and frequency of visitors," Big said.

Willett and Huggins said they hit it off from the start, both having been professional chefs in the past and each respectful of the other's space.

"I specified that I wanted to live with



Roommates Fred Willett and Alan Huggins found each other through Home But Not Alone, a housing program for people with HIV/AIDS. (Photo by R.O. Youngblood)

someone else who is gay and poz," he said. "I'm just more comfortable with other gay men than I would be a straight man or woman or whatever."

The Marcus Jewish Community Center is a non-profit, non-sectarian organization that also sponsors a program that teaches children about discrimination.

## MORE INFO

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<http://www.atlantajcc.org/HBNA.htm>