## **Quality of Life Retreats**

## **Annual Report 2019**

## February 15, 2020

Attn: Thea Becton, BWC Wellness and Missions Program Administrator

*“At each Quality of Life Retreat, our participants – all people living with HIV – are asked what they valued about the experience. Over 30+ years, the answers have become familiar; but our all-volunteer staff and Board never tire of the affirmation this life-changing ministry receives from the people it serves.”*

Quality of Life Retreats (QLR), an HIV/AIDS ministry of the Baltimore-Washington Conference, continues its 32-year commitment of offering respite, renewal and relational support to people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) in our region. Participants gather for inspiration and education while forming close bonds with one another. Our retreats provide life-enhancing encounters and learning experiences to educate participants about their conditions and to help them manage the physical, psychological, social and spiritual challenges linked to living with HIV and AIDS. In the process they develop and renew healthy relationships with others, with themselves, and with God or another source of their spiritual strength.

Favorite activities include yoga, meditation, massage therapy, arts and crafts, music, games, recreation, thematic dinners, talent show, daily prayer buddies, zip line, secret gift exchanges, and small group discussions that are both meaningful and memorable for each retreat participant. During this special “time apart” from daily routines and responsibilities, our men and women find opportunities to challenge habits and addictions and wrestle with difficult emotions like guilt, anger, grief, shame, fear, isolation and loss of self-esteem. As a result, many gain a sense of fellowship and camaraderie, safety, confidence, hope and renewed joy for living.

QLR celebrates our partnerships with congregations and service providers around the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference. Among those are Glen Burnie UMC, which offers its church bus and driver to transport retreatants from Baltimore to WDC and the Manidokan Camping Site, and Linden-Linthicum UMC in Clarksville, Grace UMC in Baltimore, and Ebenezer UMC in Lanham, which provide special mission funding, arts and crafts supplies, snacks and beverages, volunteers, and participant gifts. The DC Aquatics Club has been a significant annual donor through its Swim for Life benefit. We also welcome volunteer BWC clergy who come to preach and serve Holy Communion during our worship services. QLR is always looking to expand these vital supportive relationships throughout the BWC.

For 25+ years QLR offered four coed retreats per year. Four years ago we reduced that number to three as costs increased and grant awards and donation patterns declined. Upon request of participants, we offered a separate Women’s Retreat in April 2018 and 2019; it has been a special blessing for our women. We are saddened to report that our Board has just made the hard decision to offer only two retreats in 2020 as facility prices have dramatically increased and grants and donations have not kept pace. Those two retreats will be open to both men and women in order to provide retreat opportunities to as many as possible under current constraints. Board members are actively exploring alternative retreat sites and working to cultivate new partnerships and grant opportunities that will grow our financial base and enable us to offer more than two retreats in upcoming years.

While TV commercials assert that PLWHA can just “Take one pill “and live a normal life, we know that not to be the case for everyone. Most of our 61 retreat participants in 2019 (43 women and 18 men) represented underserved seniors, ages 59-69 years, in urban settings. Within the challenges of fixed incomes, affordable housing shortages, limited transportation, and escalating health care costs, our participants are often faced with difficult choices between food, medication, and rent. HIV infection and AIDS are still a major public health concern even though many of our friends, co-workers, and church members have the mistaken idea that with available medications all is well. We must not forget our sisters and brothers who struggle every day, not only with the challenges listed above, but also with the heavy burden of stigma that still attaches to this viral infection.

At our first Women’s Retreat, a participant spoke up to say that “My church is the last place on earth that I would feel safe to tell my HIV status. I would be thrown off every committee and never be allowed in the church kitchen or nursery again.” She has been living with HIV for 15 years. Once she spoke, another dozen women rose to say the same, some adding that they had not yet told any family members. To walk with participants at our retreats is to walk on sacred ground.

Quality of Life Retreats, founded by the Rev Dr. Terri Rae Chattin, was created to provide just such brave space for people living with HIV and AIDS to experience the love of God through community and to trust the safety of that community to hold them in the wholeness of who they are, who they were created to be. As we remain committed to QLR in the Baltimore-Washington Conference, we walk together in faith that resources, along with our 20 volunteers and ten Board Members, will be sustained as we search for ways to continue this vital, 32 year old retreat ministry.

Respectfully submitted,

Raymond Shattuck, Board Chairperson

Ella Curry, Secretary