

Frannie Peabody



Photo by Tom Antonik

Frances W. Peabody
April 18, 1903 – June 26, 2001

Recognized in Maine and nationally for her extraordinary leadership in the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Frannie Peabody had a remarkable life of service and activism that is an inspiration to all who work and volunteer at the Frannie Peabody Center. Catapulted into the HIV/AIDS epidemic at the age of 80 when her eldest grandchild was diagnosed with AIDS, Frannie devoted herself wholeheartedly for the next 18 years to the needs of people with HIV/AIDS, their families and friends, and organizations that serve them. She remained active right up until her death in 2001 at the age of 98. Her legacy is a shining example of the power of one person to make a difference.

Following the death of her grandson, Peter Vom Lehn, in California in 1984, Frannie joined an AIDS support group at First Parish Unitarian Church in Portland, to connect with others and to help with local needs. She was the only straight, white-haired, elderly woman, in a group of young gay men. From the connections she made in that group, she worked with local gay activists to establish the first AIDS Hotline in Maine in 1985 to provide needed information about the disease at a time when ignorance, phobias and discrimination dominated public response to the fast-growing epidemic. Knowing that support services and prevention education were desperately needed, in 1986 she helped establish The AIDS Project (TAP) in Portland which became Maine's largest AIDS service organization. She served for many years on its Board of Directors, founded its Advisory Board, and later funded the publication of its history, one of the first of its kind in the country. As the need for housing became especially acute, she co-founded Peabody House with the inspired, leadership support of Peter Haffenreffer. It opened on Valentine's Day 1995. It was the first and only assisted living facility in Maine for people in the advanced stages of HIV. It was long Frannie's vision that TAP and Peabody House be merged into one organization to provide more coordinated services to people with HIV. That vision was realized the year after her death with the founding of the Frannie Peabody Center in 2002.

As a long-respected member of the Portland community through her leadership work in child welfare, historic preservation and the arts, Frannie brought needed public attention to HIV/AIDS at a time when there was little understanding about the disease. Her reputation and involvement also helped attract needed financial support for a disease that struggled to get mainstream attention. Early in 1990, she invited a group of her friends – leaders in Portland's business, civic and cultural communities – to the Cumberland Club to listen to a presentation by her and local activists about the pressing HIV/AIDS needs in the community. Despite her fear that no one would show up, almost everyone did, and many who attended later formed the nucleus of TAP's Advisory Board. Later that year, when TAP was facing financial challenges, Frannie agreed to a gala testimonial dinner in her honor that brought Maine's government, civic and business leaders together to celebrate her leadership on several fronts. The event was the brainchild of TAP board member Jim Bratton. For many gathered, it was the "most memorable event in Portland," raising over \$50,000 for TAP.

Frannie was not content simply to serve on boards. She was a tireless community educator, counselor and personal friend to people with HIV/AIDS. She traveled to schools, churches and civic groups around the state to educate people about HIV/AIDS and prevention. The respected civic leader who was a national leader in the Colonial Dames talked openly about sexuality and condoms to whoever would listen. She wore a red ribbon on her lapel every day. Her efforts at education were often far-reaching. In 1992, at TAP's annual Spring for Life benefit art auction, she anonymously purchased *Vincent's Journey*, a sculptural life mask of her good friend and AIDS activist Vincent Boulanger, created by Portland artist Paul Rodrigue. She immediately donated it to the Portland Museum of Art on permanent loan, to help raise awareness about the epidemic. Vincent died in 1993. The piece remained on view at the Museum for several years, and was later given to his mother.

Nowhere does Frannie's legacy shine brighter than in her countless acts of personal involvement and direct service to people with HIV/AIDS and their families. For over 10 years, Frannie faithfully led a weekly support group at TAP on Tuesday for mothers, friends and family members of people with HIV/AIDS. She often changed her travel schedule so she wouldn't miss this weekly meeting. As a mother and grandmother, Frannie felt a special mission to mothers of people with HIV/AIDS, and regularly contacted those who were especially isolated in rural areas of →

Maine, in some cases staying in touch for many years. She was known to give the key of her beautifully restored Victorian home at 4 Walker Street in Portland's West End to out-of-town families who were visiting sick relatives at Portland hospitals and who couldn't afford local hotels.

Frannie quietly visited those who were sick and dying, often on a daily basis, among them renowned gay activist and author John Preston, who was TAP's Chairman of the Board in the early 1990's. She did the same with many of the early residents at Peabody House. She rarely missed attending the birthday party or memorial service of a Peabody House resident. When others were suffering, Frannie had a gift for providing compassionate support while steadfastly respecting the privacy of individuals and their families. Her own personal losses gave her a special understanding for the needs of families and loved ones facing serious illness and loss. In addition to the loss of her grandson, she lost a child to crib death; two of her other children survived polio; she herself survived a car crash into a river during a flash flood out west in her early 20's; and her husband died suddenly at the age of 58.

As the mother of a gay son and the grandmother of a gay man, Frannie became a staunch supporter of gay rights. She testified before the Maine Legislature on the gay rights bill. Among many anonymous deeds throughout the years, she helped pay for the legal expenses of a local man who was gay-bashed. In her final years, she was the Grand Marshall for the annual Pride Parade in Portland, sporting her signature pink boa while riding atop an antique yellow convertible as a representative of Peabody House.

Frannie was known for her keen intellect, wise counsel, incredible energy and faithful commitment to causes she cared about. In her late 80's, while she was deeply involved with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, she was also criss-crossing the country leading a national effort to create an accreditation agency for museum houses with the National Society of Colonial Dames. She was long active with their Portland property, the Tate House. She never missed a Smith College reunion, and was President of her Class of 1925 at the time of her death. She left her 70th college reunion in time to attend the annual benefit AIDS Walk in Portland, making the 3 hour drive from Northampton by herself at the age of 92. Before her work with HIV/AIDS, she was a founder of Greater Portland Landmarks, where the research library is named for her, and she helped write or publish histories of Sweetser Children's Services, Stroudwater, and Tate House.

The recipient of many local, regional and national awards for her HIV/AIDS work, and a good deal of media attention, Frannie always remarked that her work was only one part of a community effort that involved many others. While she didn't relish the spotlight, she used it to advance critical work. Major newspaper features on her life included "Revolutionary with a String of Pearls" (*The New York Times*, 1999) and "Hurricane Fran" (*Maine Sunday Telegram*, 1990). She was also featured in *Newsweek*, *McCall's* and *People* magazines. She is profiled in chapters of two books, John Preston's *Winter's Light: Reflections of A Yankee Queer* (1995) and *Friends and Family: True Stories of Gay America's Straight Allies* by Dan Woog (1999). Her awards included the Human Rights Campaign Fund of Boston Special Award in 1988. In 2000, she received the National Leadership Award from the AIDS Action Committee in Washington D.C., the national coalition of HIV/AIDS service organizations. Other honorees that year included national talk show host Phil Donahue and MTV; the event chair was Jeanne White, mother of Ryan White. In 1990, Frannie was named the 314th Point of Light by President George H. W. Bush, and Governor John R. McKernan, Jr. proclaimed November 30, 1990 "Frannie Peabody Day." In 1992, she received the Smith College Medal, the highest honor bestowed on its alumnae. In 1995, the International Women's Forum recognized Frannie as one of 20 "Women Who Make a Difference" at their global conference in Atlanta, Georgia. She received honorary degrees from Bowdoin College, University of New England and St. Joseph's College. She received her pink boa from friends on her 90th birthday, and was feted to a community birthday celebration at Portland's One City Center. Her 95th birthday was also a public event, celebrated at the Portland Museum of Art with a throng of admirers, and cakes donated from Portland's finest chefs. Governor Angus King declared that week Frances Peabody Week.

Frannie died after a brief illness on June 26, 2001, less than two weeks after her last appearance as the Grand Marshall in Portland's Gay Pride Parade. The front page of the *Portland Press Herald* sported a bold headline and large color photograph of Frannie. Major tributes appeared in many publications in the weeks that followed. Wire services carried news of her death in newspapers as far away as Los Angeles. A public memorial service was held at Merrill Auditorium, with speakers Congressman Tom Allen, Portland Police Chief Michael Chitwood, retired First Parish minister Fred Lipp, fellow Colonial Dame Mary Lou Sprague, Peabody House co-founder Chris Behan, former TAP officials Jim Bratton and Kathy Mills, and daughter Barbara Peabody. In 2002, the Lewiston-Auburn College of the University of Southern Maine presented an exhibit on Frannie's life of service, which also traveled to the Portland campus. In 2003, close friends and members of the "Royal Order of the Boa" came together to commemorate Frannie's 100th birthday at the Cumberland Club, the last of an annual tradition begun by Jim Bratton and continued by Kathy Mills. As a final, state-wide testament to her legacy, the Maine Legislature declared April 18, 2003 as Frannie Peabody Day. In the months after her death, a small group of Portland friends gathered to consider a permanent memorial to this remarkable leader, and decided that naming Portland's newly merged HIV/AIDS organizations the Frannie Peabody Center was the most fitting way to honor her legacy of service.

Frannie was laid to rest next to her husband, Millard S. Peabody, at Pine Grove Cemetery in Falmouth, at St. Mary's Episcopal Church. She was survived by four children and their families: Charlotte Paulling (d. 2017), Barbara Peabody (d. 2025), Louise Peabody and Sandy Peabody (Millard S., Jr.). Barbara Peabody published a book *The Screaming Room* (1986) which chronicled her experiences with her son Peter's illness and death with HIV/AIDS. Some of Frannie's papers are housed at the University of Southern Maine Glickman Library Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine. As fate would have it, gay marriage became law in the U.S. on the 14th anniversary of Frannie's death, on June 26, 2015, in a case argued before the Supreme Court by GLAD senior attorney Mary Bonauto of Portland.