

# **Brentwood wraps its arms around AIDS patients\_60903**

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“Magic”  
Johnson  
speaks at  
Brentwood  
Baptist  
Church in  
Houston,  
brought to  
the church  
by their  
mutual  
concern  
for  
patients  
with  
HIV/AIDS.  
An affiliate  
ministry of  
the Baptist  
General  
Convention  
of Texas  
church  
provides  
housing  
and care  
for AIDS  
victims.  
Brentwood  
Baptist  
Church

# Brentwood wraps its arms around AIDS patients

**Editor's note:** *This is the second in a year-long series highlighting the 11 characteristics of a healthy church identified by the Baptist General Convention of Texas.*

**By John Hall**

*Texas Baptist Communications*

HOUSTON—While many Christians virtually shun AIDS patients, Brentwood Baptist Church in Houston embraces them.

We're All In This Together, or WAITT for short, will mark its 10th anniversary this fall as the church's far-reaching ministry to people with AIDS.

The project was one of the first church-based AIDS ministries in the nation and now is considered a model program.

Brentwood's pioneering work in AIDS ministry illustrates one of the 11 characteristics of church health adopted by the Baptist General Convention of Texas, kingdom-based missions.



WAITT is a federally funded AIDS care program run by the church's non-profit outreach organization, the Brentwood Community Foundation. As a federally funded program, WAITT cannot be overtly evangelistic, but many volunteers are church members who seek to help in a Christ-like manner, explained the project's director, Willie Sylvester.

The effort began with church members visiting AIDS patients in the

hospital and then grew as the congregation discovered more ways to help, Sylvester said. “We can really thank those early volunteers for getting out and doing the hands-on ministry for those who needed more than a phone call.”

Volunteers and staff now provide food for more than 500 people. Many clients receive counseling and financial assistance with rent, mortgages and utilities.

The church also encourages better community understanding of the disease through forums for youth and adults.

Earvin “Magic” Johnson, the former Los Angeles Lakers star who was diagnosed with HIV in 1991, recently spoke to several crowds at the church.

The crown jewel of the Brentwood program, however, is Brentwood Cottages, three residential units built in 1997 to provide temporary housing for up to 18 HIV-positive and AIDS-infected male residents for as long as a year.

Applicants are screened for drug and alcohol abuse. Men with criminal histories go through counseling to determine if they are a threat to the surrounding community.

Many residents' lives have been “devastated” by the disease as they lose jobs, friends and families, Sylvester said. On top of these stresses, the men must cope with the notion of having a life-ending disease.

William Watts, who moved into the complex from Alabama Jan. 6, described being unable to talk with anyone about having the disease before he came to Brentwood.

At home in Alabama, “you got to hide it,” said Watts, a Baptist. “You want

to be honest, but they don't understand.

"I can't tell you or my mom how I feel," he said, tears welling up in his yellowed eyes.

However, Watts has started to bond with the other cottage residents and has drawn strength from the camaraderie.

"You have people who are dealing with the same problems you have," he said. "You have someone to talk to who understands."

The program aims to rebuild residents emotionally and financially. A caseworker guides each man through counseling and finding a job. Support staff help residents put together resumes and attain job skills.

After their yearlong stay, many residents are financially independent and find their own housing, Sylvester said.

"Brentwood staff delivered a comprehensive service that touches each resident," wrote a client who moved into an apartment after his stay at the cottages. "It was during my stay at Brentwood that I realized how much the community affected by HIV/AIDS needs help from a group like yours. Your pioneer work speaks the existence of humanity."

Such letters remind Sylvester that the outreach changes lives.

"It's a great thing to see that," he said. "It's great to hear after they've been here for awhile how much they appreciate it."

Access to a strong Christian influence also opens doors for ministry. Several residents of Brentwood Cottages have joined Brentwood Baptist Church, and others have been spiritually revitalized.

Although receiving an HIV-positive diagnosis altered Watts' outlook on life, he now is "more at peace," he said, because he has "put it in the hands of

the Lord.” He concentrates on the “bigger picture” of life and doesn't get upset as much.

That attitude change has translated into his spiritual life, he believes.

“I pray more. I thank him a lot more. I wake up and thank him,” Watts said. “I notice the trees, the birds. I appreciate life a little more.”

That's proof of the program's effectiveness, he said, explaining a goal of helping HIV/AIDS clients realize they have futures.

“HIV/AIDS doesn't mean they're dying,” he said. “They're living with it. They have to make lifestyle changes.”

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