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THE BIG ISSUE

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TWO women chatter happily in a small kitchen as the delicious aroma of freshly cooked savoury scones fills the air. It smells like home. Behind some of the doors of this house are women who are very sick and marginalised but who are nevertheless loved, listened to and cared for. For some, it's happening for the first time in their lives.

'You wouldn't believe the suffering that comes through here,' says Sister Margaret Carroll. Sister Margaret is the director of Rosehaven, a supportive accommodation centre for women with AIDS which operates under the auspices of the Australian AIDS Fund Incorporated, set up in 1994. It houses up to three women and three children at a time. Over 50 volunteers work there to maintain the household.

The women who find their way to Rosehaven are often at risk in the community. They have been rejected and have been the target of fear and loathing expressed by community attitudes. The family of one woman who lived in the house asked only to be informed when their daughter was dead.

'These people are in enormous need of emotional support' says Sister Margaret. 'I'd like to stress that you should ask your daughter or son or sister how she is and just listen to the answer and make an appropriate response. Don't just ignore them, because their emotional needs are great.'

Women come and go as they choose at Rosehaven, but they all talk about it as 'home'. Sister Margaret will often hear, 'I'm coming home for a few days, Margaret'. They enter an environment where people will touch them and they can find some respite. They may be between hospital and home and need a bit more care. Some come to die.

One woman, who said she had a good family and didn't want to join a group like Positive Women, went to her family to be cared for. Instead of a supportive environment, she found instead a place where no one would even ask her how she felt or what her blood cell count or her viral load was. She is returning to Rosehaven to be among people who will give her that support. Another woman, who developed a heart problem, said she got more phone calls from her family because of that condition than she had over the seven years they'd known about her AIDS infection.

In Australia people still suffer indignity and deprivation due to the stigma of the disease. Some of the women who go through Rosehaven are too afraid to tell their families or their work colleges that they are HIV positive.

If you are diagnosed with a life threatening illness you need to come to terms with a lot of issues: what's in store for the future, how you will live the rest of

HIV/AIDS DISCRIMINATION

For women with HIV/AIDS facing discrimination in the wider community, there is one house in Melbourne where they will always be welcome.

Story by Jeanette Leigh.



Debbie and Sister Margaret

your life, steps to maintain your health and support systems. For those who are diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, it is a different scenario.

'You're given this burden of secrecy to wear. Many people living with the virus lead a double life. I was diagnosed with a life-threatening disease but it was a condition I couldn't talk to other people about, like breast cancer or leukemia. It is so riddled with taboo,' Susan says.

Susan is not a resident of Rosehaven but she is a frequent visitor. She cared for the first resident to be housed there and it is her home away from home. She has had the disease for 10 years and has given much of her time to the HIV/AIDS cause. As much as she would like to go public, she won't, for the sake of her child, who fears the same discrimination that a young friend suffered.

For Debbie, Rosehaven is her only home. Institutionalised as a baby, she has never had a family or a home. She has adopted Sister Margaret as her godmother. 'Margaret's my godmother and Jenny's my adopted mum. The staff here are lovely. They're beautiful.'

Rosehaven receives some government funding but not enough, and it relies on donations and the work of volunteers to continue. A team of specialists, including the palliative care consultancy at the Alfred Hospital, social workers, the Royal District Nursing Service and Positive Women also provide support.

For Margaret Carroll, Presentation Sister, this job is a calling. 'I've been in it from the beginning and I feel it's been so worthwhile and the people are so beautiful,' she says. 'It's such a horrible illness and one would hope that friends and family would be able to give more support, but the fact is, they can give less.' ▲

To donate to Rosehaven call (03) 9482 6464