

AIDS walk raises 425G for services, prevention

By **ANNA HYCLAK**
hyclaka@phillynews.com
215-854-5926

More than 15,000 people gathered at the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art to participate in the city's 22nd annual AIDS Walk yesterday.

The 12k walk and 10k run, organized by the AIDS Fund, raised a record \$425,000 for 30 area organizations dedicated to HIV prevention, awareness and health services.

"We're at the point now where we can help people with HIV live longer and healthier lives," said Robb Reichard, executive director of the AIDS Fund. "But in order to do that, we need to make sure that certain services are available."

Calcutta House, which provides housing and care for homeless adults with AIDS, is one organization that will receive funds raised from the AIDS Walk. Another is Philadelphia FIGHT, which researches potential AIDS treatments and vaccines, among other projects.

"People need to understand that the fight isn't over," said Paul Yabor, an AmeriCorps volunteer who works with the HIV-care group Congreso de Latinos Unidos.

Yabor, who has been HIV-positive for 20 years, couldn't participate in this year's walk because of an injury. Instead, he watched from the sidelines as his wife, who is also HIV-positive, walked.

"A lot of people think, 'I'm white, I'm straight, I don't have to deal with it,'" Yabor said. "But anyone can contract HIV."

Yabor said that Philadelphians should be especially concerned about the disease. More than 30,000 people in the Philadelphia region are living with AIDS.

"We're an epicenter," Yabor said.

Hearing some of the local AIDS statistics in class encouraged 18-year-old Temple student Michael Hernandez to get involved with yesterday's walk.

"It was astounding to think about those numbers," said Hernandez, of Springfield, Mass. "I wanted to do my part to put a

stop to this."

For Hernandez, doing his part meant raising money around campus and sacrificing a Sunday morning to walk more than 7 miles in the autumn cold.

"It was pretty hard," he said. "But it was worth it."

On display at the bottom of the Art Museum steps were 40 panels of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, originally shown in Washington, D.C., in 1987. The quilt, with more than 44,000 panels, is the largest ongoing community-arts project in the world. Each panel is dedicated to someone who has died of complications from AIDS. The 40 exhibited yesterday honored Philadelphia victims.

"Events like this show the world that we haven't forgotten," said Cori McFadden, an AIDS Fund board member and AIDS Walk participant.

As Reichard put it, the walk doesn't just raise awareness and funds — it also raises hope.

"There might be someone at home who's just been diagnosed with HIV and maybe hasn't told his friends or family yet and is feeling pretty isolated," Reichard said. "If he sees that 15,000 people are out here supporting him, he might not feel so alone."

"When I first started working with the AIDS Fund, our goal was to help people die with dignity. Now, our goal is to help people live with dignity." ★

