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Memorial Planned for Ruth Coker Burks, Who Cared for Early Victims of the AIDS Epidemic

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
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Ruth Coker Burks

Back in the '80s, when the population of gay men was rapidly decimated by AIDS -- a disease that many feared and knew little about -- it was not unusual for their families to reject them, leaving them to die alone.

But one woman, Ruth Coker Burks, cared for them, stood beside them on their deathbed and made sure they were buried with basic human dignity. Decades later, a [GoFundMe campaign](#) is close to its \$75,000 goal to build an AIDS memorial in Arkansas to the 43 men Burks buried by herself in her family cemetery -- and to all those who died alone, unloved and unremembered.

"All I wanted was a memorial for them, a tombstone that said what happened back in 1984," Burks told EDGE from her home in Rogers, Arkansas. A grandmother now, she suffers from blood clots in both lungs and memory loss from a stroke five years ago.

Burks said that the AIDS memorial got its look from a meme featuring a "very touching image of an angel weeping." Now, she said, people come from Dallas and Tulsa looking for the cemetery.

"They'll drive up, and I'll get a text: 'Are we at the right cemetery; I don't see that angel?' That's why I decided that angel needs to be there, because that's what people are looking for. People are coming by from all over. It's a touchstone," she said.

According to Burks, architects came down from Boston before Christmas for a site visit to plan the memorial. "They wanted to know what I wanted and listened to what I had to say," said Burks. "They volunteered their time and travel to do this back when my story first came out in 2015."

She said the public's response has blown her away, adding that the Catholic Boys School in Little Rock offered to help work on the memorial. Burks is heartened by the response but is quick to note that she isn't in it for the recognition.

Drawing Straws on Death's Door

Ruth Coker Burks never set out to be an activist, much less an angel. She was visiting a friend recovering from cancer at a local hospital when, while pacing the halls, she noticed the nurses drawing straws for some dubious honor.

It was best five out of seven, then best two out of three. Burks soon saw what they were drawing for: one room had a big red bag over the door, five or six trays of food on the floor and a cart stocked with gowns, masks and booties.

"I walked right in. I just couldn't stand it," she told EDGE. "I knew it was AIDS, but I went in anyway. The man, Jimmy, was so near death, it was shocking. I walked up to his bed and took his hand. I knew what he had, but I didn't gown up. And I wasn't afraid."

All Burks really knew about AIDS was what she had heard on TV and from talking with her gay cousin in Hawaii in 1983, who had told her not to worry -- AIDS was just something that "the leather guys in San Francisco" had.

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Ruth in the '80s (Source:Courtesy Coker-Burks)

But Jimmy wanted his mother, and Burks thought she'd make a call and his family would deal with it. She went up to the nurses' station and said they immediately chastised her, saying that she was on her own if she got AIDS.



(Source:Facebook)

"I asked about contacting his mother, and they told me, 'Honey, his momma's not coming. Nobody is coming. Nobody has come in six weeks,'" she remembered.

Still, she called Jimmy's mother, who hung up on her. Burks called again and asked the woman to hear her out or she'd put her son's obituary in the hometown newspaper -- listing his cause of death.

"I had her attention, and I told her that her son was dying and wanted to see her," said Burks. "But she just said, 'He's a sinner; he died years ago. I don't want to have anything to do with that man in the hospital.' Then she hung up on me."

"So I stood outside his door, took a deep breath and went back in," Burks recalled. "I took his hand, and he said, 'Oh, momma, I knew you'd come.' What was I supposed to do? I was 25 years

old and had never encountered anything like that. I just held his hand and talked to him. He died 13 hours later."

This sad ending was just the beginning of Burks' new mission.



(Source:Facebook)

Filling an Empty Cemetery

Back when Burks was just a teenager, her mother had a huge argument with her uncle and, out of spite, purchased all 262 empty plots in the Files Cemetery to ensure that his family could never be buried with their kin. So on Jimmy's deathbed, Burks promised that she would take his ashes home with her to be buried in that cemetery, right next to her daddy.

"My daddy will like you. My grandparents will watch out after you," she told him. "I made it sound as lovely as I could. When he died, I called his mother for permission to cremate him and told her where she could visit his ashes, if she ever wanted to. After that, I thought: I've done my one good deed."

But it wasn't long before another man dying from AIDS called her. Then another one called. Then another. "They just kept

coming and coming," she remembered. "I had no idea this was going to turn into the biggest pandemic the world had ever seen."

She couldn't afford urns, so she sealed their ashes in chipped cookie jars donated from Dryden Pottery in Hot Springs. Her four-year-old daughter would dig a hole with a child's shovel, because no gravediggers would help. Not one minister from the area would even deign to say a prayer over the dirt. So Burks and her daughter said the prayers.

Burks remembers caring for nearly a thousand and burying at least 43 men's ashes, although her daughter

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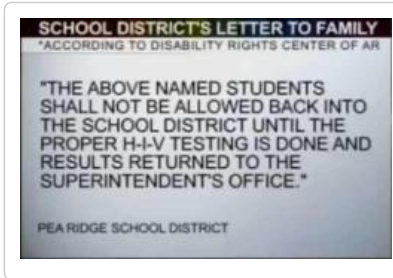


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tells her it was even more. Many people also called for permission to sprinkle their friends' or partners' ashes in the cemetery, so she is unsure how many cremains ultimately ended up in the Files Cemetery.



AIDS Discrimination Endures

Decades have passed since Burks' acts of compassion. An HIV diagnosis is no longer a death sentence. The hysteria is now largely gone, as most people know that HIV is only spread through blood or semen. But that hasn't stopped the discrimination, said Burks.

"After my stroke, insurance wouldn't take me, so I moved back home," she said. "The funeral home where I worked wanted me back, even though my memory is not so good anymore. They created a position just for me -- at least until I went on TV."

In 2013, Burks spoke out against the superintendent of Pea Ridge School District after the Arkansas Times reported he suspended three foster kids over concerns their mother was HIV-positive. The Disability Rights Center of Arkansas said the school informed the service provider that the students could not return until documentation was provided.

"The actions taken by the Superintendent of Pea Ridge School District are appalling and is reminiscent of times past and the case of Ryan White," Tom Masseau, executive director of DRC, told the Arkansas Times after the U.S. Justice Department ruled the action illegal. "The fact that the foster families have to provide documentation that the children are HIV-negative before entering the school is unlawful and immoral. Further, the fact the school's attorney authorized this unlawful act is at best appalling. It stigmatizes individuals with disabilities, or their 'perceived' disabilities, as there is no indication these individuals have HIV. There is only an unlawful fear that they do."



(Source:Courtesy Coker Burks)

But the die was already cast for Burks. After her TV appearance advocating for these children, she said she was blackballed by local businesses. When she went to fill out the paperwork for the funeral home job, the position was no longer on the table. She has been unable to find work in the funeral industry, her main job for the past 30 years, and her health issues prevent her from securing most other jobs. In fact, she said that she was hustled out of a meeting at Walmart corporate headquarters in Bentonville after revealing that she was an HIV advocate. She said she even saw them hauling away the chair she sat in.

Burks has been buoyed by small victories: The time that NPR came to town and interviewed her for six whole hours. The emails from people all over the world. The supportive letter she received last summer from President Bill Clinton, offering to donate to the memorial fund. And being voted one of StoryCorps "10 Most Interesting People of 2015."

"I never did it for any reward," said Burks. "I never even talked about it for 30 years. No one wanted to hear about it."

But these days, she's worried that history will repeat itself. Burks said that since the Trump administration shut down the Office of National AIDS Policy, things are "going back to like they were before the Reagan administration." It's up to the community now to teach young LGBTs that this really did happen, despite efforts to wipe our history away.



Ruth with Paul Wineland, one of the men whose partners she buried (Source:Courtesy NPR)

"I was afraid I would die and nobody would ever know about this," said Burks. "I feel like the men I care for and buried there - and all the other men -- gave me their memories to carry forth and to tell their stories. We have got to keep their memories alive. We have got to keep them alive."

This month, Burks will speak at Washington State University -- something she said she is happy to do for any group that asks. She's also corresponding with a professor at the University of Arkansas, who she said is writing a book, and with a documentary filmmaker who wants to tell her story. She is heartened by the growing awareness.

"You have got to remember your past or you are doomed to repeat it," said Burks. "Especially in this political climate, you

can be an activist by just doing one thing. You can change the world, even if you change just one person's

As of this writing, the Ruth Coker Burks AIDS Memorial is \$6,000 away from reaching its goal. If you'd like to see this become a reality, consider donating to the [GoFundMe campaign](#).

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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