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Shanti marks 35 years of caring

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When Dr. Charles Garfield founded Shanti in 1974 he could hardly imagine that his fledgling agency would become a lifeline of hope for thousands of gay men just a decade later.

A Sanskrit word meaning "inner peace" or "tranquility," Shanti's main mission is to train volunteers on how to provide emotional and practical support to persons living with life-threatening or chronic illnesses. Over the last three and a half decades it has trained 15,000 volunteers and provided 3 million hours of service to clients.

"They have a very proud history," said Tom Nolan, executive director of Project Open Hand, which shares administrative costs with Shanti and serves as its landlord in the city's Polk Gulch area.

At the time of its inception, it was a revolutionary idea in the world of health care. Garfield had launched his new initiative in response to seeing cancer patients dying alone or with limited support from family and friends.

"I discovered a lost civilization on the cancer wards of San Francisco's hospitals, hordes of anxious people facing a limited life span," wrote Garfield in a 2004 essay. "I wanted to find a way to meet the psychological and social needs of these patients."

He set out to teach other Bay Area residents on how to provide a bit of solace to people nearing the end of their lives. No other agency in the world was training strangers to help strangers.

"Our clients are isolated and don't have family or friends. They rely on Shanti to have one



Shanti Executive Director Kaushik Roy. Photo: Rick Gerharter

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compassionate person in their lives," explained Kaushik Roy, the agency's current executive director. "No one should face a serious or life-threatening illness by themselves."

When AIDS hit in the 1980s and began decimating the city's gay male population, Shanti's model of care became even more of a necessity. Its volunteers would visit with men living with AIDS in their homes and make sure they made it to doctor's appointments.

By the 1990s, with HIV a more manageable disease, Shanti expanded to care for women diagnosed with breast cancer. This summer it returned to its roots by launching a support group for gay and bisexual men with cancer.

"The idea of peer-to-peer counseling is applicable to so many things," said Roy, who first came to Shanti as a volunteer in 2004 and was hired to permanently lead the agency in April.

Throughout the years Shanti has faced its own crises and rumors of its imminent demise.

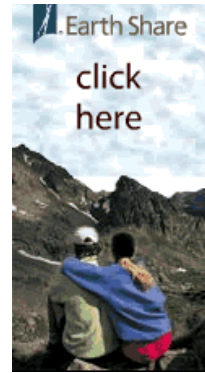
In 1988 then-Executive Director Jim Geary resigned amid allegations of sexual harassment, discrimination, and favoritism that resulted in a San Francisco Human Rights Commission investigation of the organization, according to archival documents at the GLBT Historical Society.

In 1993 the agency's then-directors quit amid questions of how Shanti had spent \$2.7 million in federal funds. A decade later the agency faced another fiscal crisis due to faltering revenue; it fired a dozen employees and cut remaining staffers' salaries in order to survive.

Today the agency operates on a \$2.4 million annual budget with 30 full-time staffers. Roy, who earns \$82,000 a year, has made increasing individual giving – up 33 percent since 2007 – a priority to cope with diminishing government support.

"I am feeling very positive about the future of the agency," said Roy, 31, who is straight. "A lot of people have a fondness for Shanti. People want to be a part of it."

Shanti's 35th anniversary party takes place at 6 p.m. Tuesday, November 10 at the Hotel Kabuki in Japantown. Tickets cost \$150 and can be purchased online at <http://www.shanti.org>.



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