

# AEGIS

## By Martin Azarnoff

"What?" you say, "**another** story about AIDS?!"

Well, I want you to know that this story isn't exactly about Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. I mean it is, but this story is mainly about Sister Mary Elizabeth.

Sister Mary Elizabeth is the administrator of the AIDS Education General Information System (AEGIS) BBS in San Juan Capistrano, California. She is one of the people dedicated to halting this pandemic, and, she has a story to tell.

It was in my search for accurate information to bring to The OneNet community that I met the Sister who said, "When I was eight years old, I proudly announced to my parents that I wanted to be a nun. They promptly put me in a Baptist church," she recalls with a chuckle in her voice. "I spent the next 15 years involved in Baptist and independent fundamentalist activities. And, before I became a nun, I spent most of my life in the military, in the electronics field."

After spending time in the South in the late 1950's, and witnessing the birth of the Civil Rights movement, the military shipped her off to Hawaii, and finally to Vietnam in 1968.

"After I left the military, I went back to school, without knowing what I wanted to do. I took a career development course and counselor said, "You better sit down. The two things you're qualified for are: being a Catholic nun social work teacher, or a Catholic nun science teacher."

"I spent time with Franciscans in San Francisco and realized that my mission, and their community, wouldn't work out. I got a letter from a Sister in Northern California saying that I was being called to form a new community. I started a new order in 1987."

"This is the first thing I've ever done I feel totally committed to. Everything else was just a job," she says. She'll tell you, with that same quiet conviction, that the idea of running a computer-based AIDS-only bulletin board occurred to her while she was tending cows in a rural Missouri town of 1,014 people.

"The nearest hospital was close to 40 miles away and the town barely got the TV signals from the national networks. Some of the townsfolk had cable, but there was nothing on the farms. The old-fashioned telephone system used party lines-where up to five people shared one phone line. There were HIV positive people living in that town too. But, if you were HIV-positive and wanted information, you had to call out on a single-line pay phone," she says. "Doing otherwise was a quick way to get your farm burned to the ground."

A solution to this peculiar brand of information isolation occurred to her when she returned to California. "I figured the one way for people to get information,

and yet let them maintain their privacy, would be a computer system. The worst that happens is someone picks up the line and hears a rush of noise. Maybe someone would get disconnected, but their privacy would be maintained." Two electronic information services, Compuserve and Dialog, already existed, but there was either no HIV information or the service was too expensive. "My vision," she says, "was to establish a free access bulletin board with an anonymous logon."

Established in 1992, AEGIS is operated by the Sisters of St. Elizabeth of Hungary order, an Episcopalian religious community. Its predecessor, the HIV/AIDS Info BBS, began in 1990 when the original system went online with a lowly 40 megabyte hard drive. Capacity was quickly doubled with a 80 megabyte drive. Soon thereafter, a generous businessman from Japan donated a one gigabyte drive which still serves as part of the main server hardware.

AEGIS connects AIDS dedicated electronic bulletin boards around the world, encouraging communities to work together in the fight against AIDS. As a free-access electronic network for communication and exchange of HIV-AIDS information, AEGIS "connects four-fifths of the world through its links with other networks," Sister Mary Elizabeth explains. "I talk to people all over the world. I'll get up in the morning and someone from Russia has left a message. Or someone from Uganda, or Australia. Last night, someone from Zimbabwe was asking for help using the Internet to get information. It's an exciting time." You can sense the dedication and vitality in her voice .

"People began to be aware that we existed. It was a chance conversation on FidoNet that led to connecting with a bulletin board in Seattle and another in Denver," the Sister remembers.

"From there, it soon mushroomed. AEGIS now connects with HIVnet in Amsterdam, Holland and APC/Greenet in London, England which connects sub-Saharan Africa and Asia."

Nurturing AEGIS along has been hard work. Sister Mary Elizabeth is up daily at 4:30 a.m. retrieving recent articles and bulletins from government computers on the East coast. She scans, catalogs and loads them into the IBM-based system that AEGIS runs on.

The Sister is fond of talking about her "community." Not only the small community of sisters with whom she works, but the much larger community she meets on the network. "I meet so many people from so many walks of life. Not just people in the United States, but Canadians, Australians, Europeans, Africans, Asians. People of much different cultures from mine and yours. I've been learning that it's more than accepting people and the differences we perceive, but acknowledging that we are all different and that we must celebrate those differences."

Many of the people she meets do have one thing in common. They are all infected with HIV, and tragically, most go on to develop AIDS and die. "You

become accustomed to someone's handle, their writing style, their 'voice' " she muses. "How did Data on *Star Trek* put it, 'My neural pathways have become accustomed to you.' Then all of a sudden, there's silence. Another bright star in the heavens has gone away."

It's people like Sister Mary Elizabeth who are making headway against AIDS. She reminds us that, if we're going to win out over this virus, then we're going to have to do it together. "I want people to remember that we are all human. That we all share responsibility in this world for each other. There is only one race, the human race."

**After word:**

AIDS is exacting a tragic toll in our communities. Upwards of 14 million people are already infected worldwide. In America, one in 250 people are believed to be infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), the virus we see in people with AIDS. Sadly, while messages about prevention abound, people continue to become infected.

Today in the United States, adolescent women of color are becoming infected at a faster rate than anyone else, and, they are getting infected via unprotected heterosexual sex. The scope of this disease is staggering. Twelve years into this epidemic, we still have no cure and millions of people around the world have already died from AIDS. Until a cure is found, the only effective weapon in the fight against AIDS is education and prevention.

As the moderator of the HIV/AIDS conference here on The OneNet, and a staunch proponent of AIDS education, I invite you to our conference. There you'll find a great deal of HIV and AIDS information to read and download.

- Every thirteen minutes another American is infected with HIV, and every 17 minutes someone dies of AIDS.
- Conservative estimates are that one in every 250 Americans carries HIV.
- AIDS is now the third leading cause of death among all adults between the ages of 25 and 44. In many areas of the country—including the cities near OneNet Los Altos—it is the number one leading cause of death of men in that age group.
- The fastest rate of new infection is among adolescent women, who get it from unprotected heterosexual sex.
- Estimates from the World Health Organization are that the year 2,000 will see 110 million people infected with HIV. Forty million of those will have AIDS, and 40 percent of those people (about the population of Canada today) will be women and children.

AEGIS can be reached by anyone with a computer and a modem. All four lines support 14,400 baud or greater. The AEGIS modem phone number is 714/248-2836. Set your software to 8 bits, no parity, one stop bit. Selected material from AEGIS is uploaded irregularly to OneNet Los Altos and the HIV/AIDS conference. If you would like specific information, you might try

posting a question or request on OneNet first.

- Truly I say unto you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.  
Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats. Matthew 25:32, 45