

A BEACON OF HOPE

It was Robin Rees who made the first move.

Although their families had a past – her parents were married by his dad and his dad had preached at the church where her dad had led worship – introductions didn't occur until Chris Rees returned from the Honduras mission field, where his parents served, to attend an area university. After encouragement from a friend, Chris began attending Ridgecrest, and after a suggestion from her grandma, Robin asked him to be her date for her senior prom.

“I kind of laughed,” recalls Chris' mom, Martha Rees. “We were excited.”

As history would tell it, the two fell in love and were married in 1993. “I really believe God brought us together,” Robin says. “I feel at home with Chris. He's steady; I'm flighty. He's thoughtful; I'm action. We are very different.”

Four years later, Robin and Chris were expecting their first daughter, Alli, a healthy baby girl born in August 1997. In February, though, doctors gave Chris fist-in-your-gut news about his own health. “February 19, 1997 was the day AIDS became blaringly personal to me,” Robin remembers, “because that's the day Chris was diagnosed with HIV.”

Chris spent his eighth birthday in a hospital in Costa Rica having a tumor in his sinuses removed. Two years later, Chris spent his 10th birthday in a hospital in Houston, Texas, having chemo treatments to shrink the tumor that had returned. “Of course, the chemo brought his blood counts to a point where he needed transfusions,” Martha explains. “We believe Chris became infected with HIV while being treated in Houston” between his 10th and 11th birthdays.

For two years after Chris' HIV diagnosis, Robin felt God moving her into a new ministry. “I heard stories of those infected who, when a pastor came to visit them, the pastor wouldn't touch them or get close to them,” she says. “These stories were such a contrast to what Chris and I were experiencing as the body of Christ surrounded us with love and prayer and support. I knew our situation was, for the most part, an exception. I wanted others affected and infected to feel the love and grace that Chris and I have felt extended to us by our families, church family, missionary family and the entire body of Christ.”

Hence, the Lighthouse Ministry was brought to life. “When Chris was diagnosed,” Lori Gott says, “I had several friends who had passed away with AIDS. So Robin and I came together to form the Lighthouse Ministry, named so because it's a beacon of hope.”

Robin, Lori and Lori's husband, Burley Gott, currently serve the ministry, which partners with the AIDS Project of the Ozarks [aidsprojectoftheozarks.org]. The volunteers began by participating in the AIDS walk while wearing Ridgecrest t-shirts “just to show our presence,” Lori says. Next, they helped stock pantry shelves at APO. “We place RBC address labels on the pantry items so the recipients know this is a safe place for them to come so they won't be judged,” Lori added. At Christmas, the ministry hosts a Christmas party and gives presents to children whose parents have AIDS.

“They are very vulnerable,” Martha says of those infected with HIV/AIDS. “Many times, they sell all they have in order to obtain the medication they need to stay alive. For this reason, they need the daily essentials of life. They also need a tender word, a loving touch. They need to know that someone cares. They need anonymous intervention. They need the Lord, and they need prayer. Their families need support as they face an unknown future.”

It’s also a good opportunity to *raze* Hell, Robin adds. “These are the issues smacking us in the face. If we are not willing to charge ahead in the banner of Christ’s love, then the magnitude of missed opportunity could be overwhelming.”

If you would like to volunteer or for more information on the AIDS ministry, please call 885.5217.