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No Need To Look Back

By Dan Coburn

His hoarse cough echoed, the sound bouncing off the high ceiling of the East County church building. It was the kind of cough that made you want to turn around to see who bore the illness that accompanied it. The congregation was familiar with the sound. No one needed to look back. We knew it was Dr. Randy Dawson, sitting as comfortably as he could on one of only two padded wooden chairs on the back row.

I write about Randy Dawson, not from a close personal relationship but as one who watched him live and die with courage and dignity. I felt, as many did, that I was just beginning to get to know Randy well when his life ran out.

For most of his 39 years, Randy Dawson lived life in a hurry. While he was still in high school, he earned enough money to buy his first rental house, paid his own way through college, and then worked his way through medical school. As a resident in emergency medicine, it was not unusual for him to work 80 hours a week.

His fast-paced life was not limited to his

career either. Randy returned to Portland in 1985 after completion of medical school and a two-year stint with the Air Force, frequently volunteering his energy to charitable causes.

At thirty-something, Randy was at the top of his profession and reaping benefits. He possessed a taste for the finer things in life and made no apologies about his enjoyment of them. At the same time, he was very generous with his wealth. In 1986, he spearheaded an alumni fund raiser for his alma mater, Columbia Christian College, and he offered material and emotional support to individuals as well. Randy Dawson was a man whom people noticed and around whom people were compelled to examine their own goals and priorities.

One Sunday after services, Randy asked to speak with me privately. With sweaty palms, I followed him to a corner of the building. You see, Randy had always greatly intimidated me. From music to gourmet cooking to relationships, he spoke fluently and confidently about many things. Added to that, he had a biting, dry wit and little patience for illogical reasoning, a combination which created for me a most imposing character!

He began our conversation by telling me how pleased he was that I was a part of the leadership of our congregation and how he had great confidence in our decisions and direction. He went on to describe ideas he had for new ministries. I shook his hand,

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looked into eyes I'd never really noticed before, and walked away esteemed in a rare way.

There were members of the congregation who knew early on that Randy's "health concerns" listed in the bulletin amounted to more than a temporary illness that he might overcome. Some also knew why he became ever more gaunt and wore looser-fitting clothes, disguising his condition. The truth of Randy's condition began to break over the East County church members as they watched his participation as the medical expert on a program called **The Church's Response to AIDS**, a show broadcast nationwide on the Christian Satellite Network. Several times in the course of the program, Randy used the pronoun "we" instead of "they" in reference to those with AIDS.

As video copies of the program were passed among the congregation, many members were beginning to realize that AIDS was not just something "out there." It had a face — the face of Dr. Randy Dawson.

As he became increasingly ill, he somehow managed to continue to follow an amazing schedule. One ministry he saw as crucial concerned self-esteem among young children. Randy rallied the qualified counselors and educators of the congregation to develop a workshop especially for three year olds and their parents. Funded completely by Randy, it came to be known as **Self-Esteem in God's Children** and continues to serve area churches.

While many in the congregation were now aware of Randy's disease, it wasn't until Wednesday, January 2, 1991, that Randy decided to speak publically about it. That night he was featured on the CBS program called "48 Hours" as an individual in the medical setting who suffered with AIDS. The subsequent days of front-page press and television news coverage created great controversy about the doctor with AIDS. People discussed whether he should have informed patients of his disease and whether, in fact, he should be practicing at all. They examined his morals and speculated about about how he contracted the disease. The media attention was intense.

In an in-depth cover story in the **Sunday Oregonian** entitled "The Hidden Side of Dr. Dawson, The AIDS Story That Spun Out of Control," writer Suzy Boss echoed what many must have felt at this time: "Why when Randy Dawson could have taken his secrets with him quietly to the grave did he elect to make himself a public figure? Why indeed would a fastidious person such as Dawson, who can't walk past a crooked picture without straightening it, ever open the door on such a messy detail?"

One Sunday night as he addressed the con-

gregation, Randy responded: "When is the right time to tell anyone you have AIDS? My administrators at the hospital said never. Most of my friends have told me there's never a good time. Well, I don't know when a good time is, but as you may have heard me say, I know a bad time — that's when I'm dead."

He wanted more than anything to educate, which he saw as the only true cure to the AIDS virus. Suzy Boss was right. Randy's declaration did open up all sorts of issues that made his public life spin out of control. However, she didn't know the other "hidden side" of Randy Dawson, the side we at East

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County were coming to know in new ways.

We were coming to know him because he was consistently and specifically in our prayers. Members faithfully sent cards, phoned and visited him. One member worked in conjunction with Randy's former hospital staff to provide meals on a regular basis. She often transported the prepared meals to Randy herself and soon began to share with him concerning her pending pregnancy. When the prognosis was for twins, Randy grew excited and provided medical information and more importantly attention and comfort which allayed her worries. She learned, as many would, an amazing lesson of care. In action and speech Randy consistently treated his disease as a huge nuisance while treating others' problems with genuine concern. As the church sought to reach out to Randy, and felt inadequate in doing so, he expressed his needs in the following way, "If you ever ask what you can do for me, you have already done it. You've made me feel as a necessary person in this congregation." While he had been for a long time spiritually connected through a few individuals, now for the first time in his six years at East County, and perhaps since his childhood at Roseburg, he was, in his weakness, made a

strong part of the body.

While scripture speaks to us of the weak as strong and suffering-joy themes, it was in Randy's dying that East County had the rare opportunity to participate in a model of those themes. Randy could certainly be seen as afflicted, perplexed, persecuted and struck down. In 2 Corinthians 4 Paul addressed suffering by reminding us that though afflicted in every way, we are not crushed, though perplexed we are not despairing, though persecuted we are not forsaken, though struck down we are not destroyed. Randy modeled someone living in this hope of the life to come.

Dr. Randy Dawson taught us about AIDS and so much more. He accepted our hugs as an attempt to reach out. He began to speak to us

honestly about his homosexuality. His story reminded us that we are all sinners. He allowed us to look in the mirror and see ourselves dying. He demonstrated the amazing power of God's redemptive love. He helped us understand how, in consoling him, we ourselves at last found consolation and the strength to go on.

Randy used to talk of wanting to see an angel. On November 13, 1991, he was granted his wish. His death marked an end to his suffering and to his hurried, brilliant life. While the echo of his cough is no longer heard in the East County building, there is still no need for us to look back. Randy's presence is still there — strongly felt in the back row of our attitudes and thoughts.