

Karen Bellesky: Finding Her Calling

It took a little while before Karen Bellesky's new job became her calling—all of two months.

Hired in April 1992 as Chase Brexton Health Care's first registered dietician, Karen wasn't familiar with the clinic and believed she was taking just another job. Instead, she was deeply moved by the dedication of her colleagues and the great struggles her patients faced, and quickly became a passionate advocate for Chase Brexton's work.

The turning point came about two months into her tenure, when Karen met with a patient dying of AIDS and their partner. The couple playfully asked how she liked working with LGBT patients.

"I said, 'I'm so grateful you're gay because if you were straight, I wouldn't be able to concentrate, because I'd be drooling,'" she recalls. "And they burst into laughter, which is what it was meant to be, and that was it. I knew I was okay."

Karen remained with Chase Brexton until April 2015, a 23-year run that makes her, at the time of this writing, the longest-serving employee in Chase Brexton history. In addition to her duties as a dietician, she served as the organization's Grants Coordinator, overseeing the acquisition of critical funding.

Getting those grant applications together sometimes involved extreme measures, such as one night in 2001, long before digital submissions were accepted.

"That was the year that I literally spent the night getting the grants printed, because I was using two copiers," she said. "But I had 14 grants at 250 pages apiece, with seven copies [each]—or, eight copies, because I had to have one. That was kind of crazy. But again, you did what you had to do—because that was a huge chunk of our budget at that time."

Amid those 28,000 pages of grant applications, her deep dedication was far from unique among her colleagues.

"It was grassroots, and there wasn't one employee that wasn't totally committed," she said. "We didn't think about hours, no one worked 9 to 5 and we were okay with it. And we pitched in wherever we were needed."

She paid a personal price for her involvement with Chase Brexton, even among her own family. The strong stigma against HIV patients at the time extended to those who cared for them as well.

"My sister refused to let my nephews come to my house, because [she believed] I had gay germs and HIV germs. So they never came to my house to eat, they never came to my house for anything until 2000," she said. "Dating was really difficult, I never told anyone where I worked or exactly what I did."

Despite the cost to her and her colleagues, Karen said Chase Brexton's work provided hope and solace to a community in desperate need of both. Looking forward, she shared her wishes for the organization's future.

“To continue to be able to provide quality health care to all in need, without any type of stigma,” she said. “And to continue to grow and monitor the growth spurts...don’t grow too big too fast, and make sure you’re able to do quality care. And have more dieticians.”