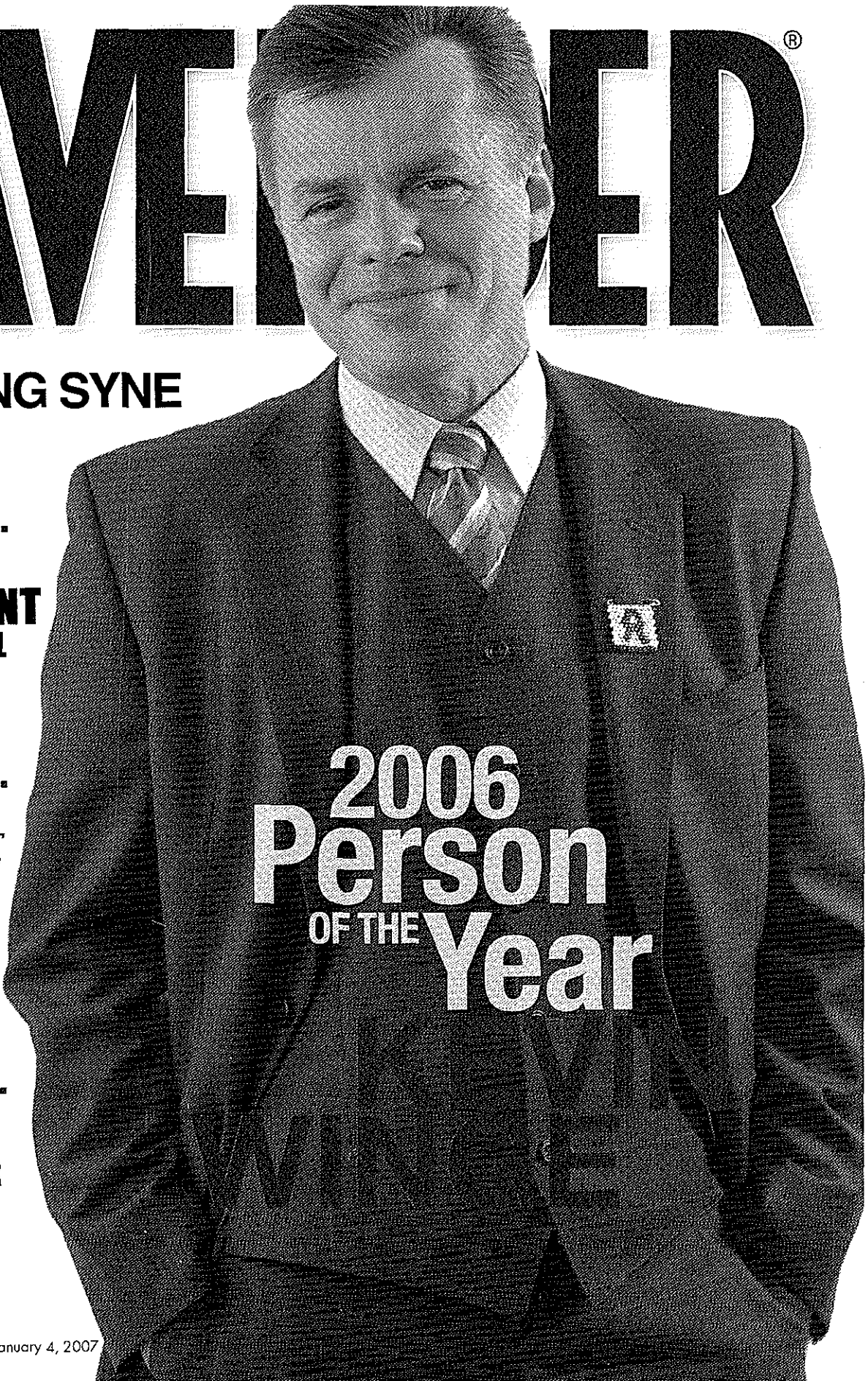


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**2006
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On a Winge and a Prayer

**KEVIN
WINGE**

**Lavender 2006
Person of the Year**

IN A SNOWSTORM IN UPSTATE NEW York in 1983, a young Kevin Winge, recently out of college, began a new life for himself far from friends and family in Minnesota.

What seemed a whimsical choice made by a single guy in his early 20s would lead Winge into the vibrant gay scene of New York City, and to new friends and new experiences. It would change the path of his life forever, and, after little more than a decade, would lead him back to Minnesota and, eventually, to South Africa.

The spreading pandemic of HIV/AIDS slowly would cast its long shadow over Winge's life. By August 1996, most of his friends in New York were dead from the disease. He moved back to Minnesota that year, looking for something he could do—some way he could make a difference to those living with the disease.

Finally, at 6 PM on New Year's Eve, Winge found himself in a dark church basement in Minneapolis, sitting for his final interview for the position of Executive Director of Open Arms of Minnesota.

"I remember saying, 'Either this is the most dedicated board of directors I've ever seen, or



Photo by Lavender Studios

none of you has a life!" Winge recalls.

Today, in a light-colored blazer, button-down shirt, slacks, and yellow tie, Winge somehow manages to appear impeccably professional and boyish at the same time. He looks younger than his 47 years. A smile always seems to be not too far from his lips.

More comfortable at the helm than in the spotlight, he doesn't like to talk about his personal life. Ask him about growing up gay in small-town Minnesota, and his face darkens, his voice softens, and he hunches forward. However, ask him about Open Arms or his work in South Africa, and he becomes animated, loquacious, and strongly opinionated.

"We've spent a great deal of time and effort trying to get people to not see AIDS as a gay disease, and not to see Open Arms as a gay organization. Because we're not. We never have been," Winge explains. "For me, [being gay] is not so important. It's just part of the mix."

After that final interview with the board on New Year's Eve 1996, Winge spent the next five years working at Open Arms. Along with scores of dedicated volunteers and staff, he helped move the organization from the original church basement to its own building, and steadily increased the number of people served from around 100 clients in 1996 to nearly 400 today.

In 2002, though, Winge longed to pursue other interests, including working in Sub-Saharan Africa. Not one to be daunted by long odds, he applied to and was accepted by the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. At the same time, the Bush Foundation awarded him a leadership fellowship to defray the costs of the Harvard program, as well as to fund him for six months of work in Cape Town, South Africa.

Winge established his deep connection to South Africa, specifically the township of Guguletu, in 2000 on a trip to an international AIDS conference with other Open Arms board members.

However, Winge's concerns for the continent and its people have roots in the late 1990s. Over the years, he watched as rising levels of infection continued to exceed the direct predictions of health professionals and government agencies.

For Winge, it became an ethical dilemma. How could he live with himself if he stood by and watched thousands upon thousands of people fall ill and die, in the same way that the majority of Americans watched countless gay men wither and die in the early days of HIV/AIDS?

It was while Winge worked in South Africa that he began to write to friends back home about the individuals he met, the lives he touched, and the challenges individuals living with HIV/AIDS faced in South Africa.

Through the strength and immediacy of these letters home, friends began offering to send money, which Winge gladly put to use. These donations, garnered while he was affiliated with no officially recognized nonprofit organization, helped form the basis for the outreach that later would become Open Arms of Minnesota's international program.

"AIDS has always been a disease of 'the other' or 'those people' or 'them.'" Winge writes in his book *Never Give Up: Vignettes from Sub-Saharan Africa in the Age of AIDS*, published by Syren Book Company in August of this year. "Around the world, 'those people' now living with HIV/AIDS are much more likely to be women, and African, Indian, or Chinese."

Winge returned from South Africa in 2004 unsure of his next step. Luckily, he had

the opportunity to step into his old job at Open Arms, which had been held during his absence by Mark Hiemenz, now Executive Director of Hands On Twin Cities.

Back in his role as Executive Director, and confronted with the evolving face of AIDS, Winge and Open Arms have had to embrace change quickly and substantively to continue serving their clients.

"If you're not changing, you're dying," Winge states, "because the world is changing."

When Open Arms began delivering meals to people living with HIV/AIDS in 1986, no one could have predicted where the disease would go. In the beginning, the organization addressed a very specific population and a very specific need. Now, the populations have changed, and the needs have changed along with the demographics.

Today, nearly 78 percent of Open Arms clients live below the federal poverty level, according to Winge. Since 1996, the number of clients who represent minority populations has doubled, from 27 percent to more than 50 percent.

"We can't continue to do our work the way we've always done it just because that's the way we've always done it," Winge notes.

With that in mind, Winge led Open Arms through an expansion of services in 2005, when it began serving people fighting breast cancer, as well as those diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and ALS (commonly known as "Lou Gehrig's Disease") through its meal-delivery program.

Before the expansion, Open Arms held focus groups of clients, volunteers, and donors.

"Our clients got it right away," Winge recounts.

Clients realized the importance of meals for all people dealing with progressive diseases, but they also understood immedi-

"You don't need \$10,000 to make a difference," Winge says. "Find *something*. It doesn't have to be AIDS. There are enough issues in the world. Find something that you're passionate about, and do it."

ately the importance of building bridges and understanding among individuals of different backgrounds.

When critics raised concerns about Open Arms moving away from its mission, Winge took that opportunity to speak to the important difference between the services the organization provides and what he sees as its true work.

"It brings whole new worlds of people together who otherwise wouldn't have met," Winge relates. "That's how you start to affect change."

Winge sees the force of more than 1,300 volunteers who keep the organization running not only as caregivers delivering meals, making food, or donating time to staff the offices, but also as ambassadors to their many diverse communities.

In Winge's words, "So, if someone volunteers at Open Arms and returns to their communities, and they hear someone say something disparaging about gay people, or people in poverty, or people of color, they can say, 'No. That's not true. I work with those people, and they are not like that.'"

Another change that Open Arms has made under Winge's direction is in the

way it delivers meals.

Because many people with progressive diseases like HIV/AIDS are living longer these days, and often can work, the old model of providing three hot meals daily wasn't effective for all clients all the time.

Again, after consulting clients, volunteers, and donors, Open Arms switched gears in a matter of days to deliver a majority of its meals frozen on a weekly basis.

Ultimately, though, it's Open Arms's new international work that Winge seems most proud of.

The seed money Winge raised while on his fellowship in Cape Town, South Africa, helped launch a congregate hot lunch program for more than 50 people affected by HIV/AIDS in Guguletu, an impoverished community of about 300,000 just outside Cape Town. Fully one-third of the people there are dealing with HIV.

Winge, working with locals through the Zwane Community Center, also launched a twice-yearly food parcel program, which continues today. As of World AIDS Day, December 1, 300 families were getting enough food to last them a month, delivered in plastic buckets that can be used to

haul water when the food is gone.

Other international AIDS organizations hope to take the Open Arms model, and replicate it in new communities throughout Africa every year.

"It's not a scarcity model," Winge remarks as he smiles again, and holds his arms wide open in front of himself in a gesture meant to encompass the room, the table he's sitting at, the building, Minneapolis, the United States, and apparently the rest of the world. "It's an abundance model."

Winge adds, "I get so tired of people coming up with excuses not to do something. I will not accept the excuses that most people use for inaction. You don't need \$10,000 to make a difference. Find *something*. It doesn't have to be AIDS. There are enough issues in the world. Find something that you're passionate about, and do it."

To find out how much sponsoring a parcel of food for a family in Guguletu costs, or to learn about volunteering at Open Arms of Minnesota, call (612) 872-1152, or visit <www.openarmsmn.org>. ■

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