

## Stephen Barnett – HIV Mental Health Program

Greenwich House is a long way from Heath, Ohio where Stephen Barnett grew up and first learned to use a camera. By the time he arrived in New York in 1991 at the age of twenty-five he had already gained some professional experience photographing contestants in the Miss Ohio pageant. Like so many others New York was his dream. And like so many others, for Stephen, New York would be prove to be more than just a professional challenge. Supporting himself by taking odd jobs in photo labs, he tried to move from the hardscrabble work-a-day life of fashion-oriented photography to photography as art. As he did this he found himself becoming more and more introspective as he struggled through his camera to make sense of the relationship between life, the soul, and pain.

It was at this juncture in his artistic development that Stephen found himself staring at his own, mental and physical agony – at Christmastime in 1996, at the age of thirty; he discovered he was HIV Positive.

Stephen considers himself fortunate that a friend knew about Greenwich House's work with the HIV community. His first therapist, Dave Rogers, helped him fight back through the first six months of shock, disbelief, fear, and tears. When he came out on the other side, although he no longer felt invincible, he knew his life had changed, but he had a focus and a purpose he never had before, and he knew what he needed to do with the rest of his life. He had something to say and he knew how he needed to say it.

Stephen's work is all about the fuzzy, amorphous realm we call existence. Difficult concepts to express with words yes, but his photographs, by their very nature, capture moments of life or many moments of life – like the time he documented a friend's hair growth after he decided he no longer wanted to be bald. He has exhibited in Manhattan and Staten Island, where he lives. And where photography was first just a means of enjoyment, it has become a full expression of him.

Greenwich House's HIV Mental Health Program has allowed Stephen to make his medical challenges a part of his life, not an ante-chamber where he waits to die. Greenwich House's compassionate therapists, and its dedicated, reliable staff are more than just a set of programs sponsored by a non-profit organization – for Stephen Barnett, photographer and artist, they are a means of fulfilling his dreams for his life.