

Obituary: Evelyn Josephine Fisher, M.D.

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

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Evelyn Josephine Fisher was a native Detroiter born to parents Josephine and Otto Fisher and raised in Detroit's Indian Village neighborhood. She attended the prestigious Country Day School for elementary and University Liggett School in Grosse Pointe Woods for high school. After graduating, Fisher attended Wayne State University where she studied Russian and was on a pre-med track. She switched to Wayne State University Medical School after her junior year. Following that, Fisher interned at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis and then returned to Detroit to complete her residency at Henry Ford Hospital.

Soon enough, Fisher was a senior staff member of the infectious disease department at Henry Ford. In 1982, Fisher saw her first patient with AIDS and, in a way, found her true calling. Though little was known about HIV or AIDS at the time, Fisher jumped right in and was soon treating a majority of all HIV-related cases in the state.

"She was truly a pioneer in the mid-'80s when we were facing this HIV epidemic in an era where there was a lot of prejudice," said Dr. Paul Benson, who started Wellness Networks, Michigan's oldest AIDS service organization, with Fisher in the mid-'80s.

Fisher was the agency's medical director and sat on the board.

"She stood above that prejudice and was a recognized leader in the community in treating HIV," Benson continued. "Evelyn was a very dedicated

and compassionate physician as well as a community leader and LGBTQ advocate. And, again, this was in times when there was a lot more discrimination in the world and a lot of prejudice against those living with HIV. She treated everybody equally and fairly and did not let lifestyle interfere with giving the best most compassionate treatment she could."



Dr. Evelyn Josephine Fisher. Courtesy photo.

Terry Ryan, who would go on to serve as executive director of Midwest AIDS Prevention Project, now known as Matrix MAC Services, was an early employee of Wellness Networks.

"Evelyn was on the board of Wellness at that time," he said. "She came over to me immediately after I was hired and said, 'Here's my pager number, anything you need to know or any problems, page me and come find me.' We were starting the Michigan AIDS Hotline and she knew I'd be getting lots of calls and we didn't know shit from Shinola about HIV in those days. But Evelyn was always hugely supportive and hugely available. She was one of the most delightful people that I have worked with anywhere over the years, especially in HIV work."

Wellness Networks would eventually become AIDS Partnership Michigan, and Barbara Murray would serve as the agency's executive director for many years.

"Evelyn certainly was part of the founding group of what was back then called Wellness Networks and then became AIDS Partnership Michigan, along with a pretty tight-knit group of

gay men," Murray said. "She was the go-to. She was always going to the Motor City Business Forum and Evelyn spoke regularly at that program back in the late '80s because we knew not a lot. And she was the go-to doctor. Evelyn's presence and letting people know what was going on with AIDS, she was just really critical to everybody in southeast Michigan to hear what was going on. She was there all the time."

Fisher's efforts would win her great recognition. The Detroit News named her Citizen of the Year in 1985. In 1987, the Detroit Science Center would give her its Trailblazer Award. She was also presented with the Mercy Award at the University of Detroit — Mercy's 1989 Works of Mercy Dinner. Her work, however, was not limited to the HIV/AIDS realm. She spoke Spanish and this allowed her to become the staff physician at CHASS Center Detroit, a public health clinic in Detroit that specializes in culturally competent care for the Latino community. She also ran the Pallister-Lodge Methadone Clinic at Henry Ford Hospital. In addition, Fisher was a highly respected teacher, researcher and author.

Fisher left Detroit in 1992 and headed to Richmond, Virginia, where she joined the faculty of the Virginia Commonwealth University/Medical College of Virginia School of Medicine. In 2014, Fisher retired and returned to Detroit. In her free time, Fisher enjoyed birdwatching, reading, the Michigan Opera Theatre and all of Detroit's major sports teams.

Per her wishes, Fisher was cremated. Memorial donations can be made to AIDS Partnership Michigan, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, Amnesty International or The Humane Society.