

# Varee Suthireung

By Timothy Cwiek  
PGN Contributing Writer

Varee Suthireung, one of the city's most visible women living with AIDS, died Dec. 12.

She was 27 and lived in Queen Village.

News of her death sent a shock wave through We The People's Dec. 13 board meeting. Suthireung was a key member of the board of directors for the last two years.

Friends said they did not realize the seriousness of her recent lung ailment.

"Varee was a doll, and everyone loved her," said a tearful member of We The People after the meeting. "I never once heard her complain about her [health] problems. But God, was she there for everyone else."

Friends remembered Suthireung as a person who was able to connect with a wide range of individuals.

"Varee was a peacemaker, a bridge between so many people," said her friend Pam Ladds. "She used to call herself a chameleon because she could fit in anywhere. But I saw Varee in four basic roles: visionary, healer, teacher and warrior. She was all of those things in a really positive way."

Born in Bangkok, Thailand, Suthireung moved to Texas when she was 7 years old. She never graduated from high



that was the message she gave to other women: Get whatever information you can and then make your own decisions. Don't be pushed around."

Suthireung held a variety of paid positions at We The People, including receptionist, testing counselor, and AIDS prevention specialist.

In 1992, she agreed to have her life story spotlighted on Page One of the Philadelphia Inquirer, knowing her message of hope could help others, Ladds said.

We The People director David Fair said Suthireung will be missed.

"It's hard to say enough about Varee," he said. "For three years, she dedicated her life to people living with AIDS. Her heart was always open to people."

It was Suthireung's idea to hold a well-publicized hunger strike in May 1994 to dramatize the need for more state support of the Betak Nursing

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Born in Bangkok, Thailand, Suthireung moved to Texas when she was 7 years old. She never graduated from high school. Instead, she joined a motorcycle gang and worked, for a time, as a prostitute.

All that changed after she was diagnosed with HIV, while pregnant with her son Brandon, now 5.

Ladds said Suthireung relocated to Philadelphia, where she had relatives, and turned her life around.

"She joined We The People and made it an OK place for women to be," Ladds said. "One of Varee's strengths was her ability to stay very calm. She was the person who kept order at board meetings, not always an easy thing to do. She made sure that everybody got heard."

Suthireung had strong ideas about freedom of health-care choices, Ladds said.

"She gave birth to Brandon in a taxi because her doctor insisted on doing a C-section, which she didn't feel was necessary," Ladds said. "Varee followed her own instincts, and



that was the message she gave to other women: Get whatever information you can and then make your own decisions. Don't be pushed around."

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It was Suthireung's idea to hold a well-publicized hunger strike in May 1994 to dramatize the need for more state support of the Betak Nursing Home, Fair said.

"Varee said she was abused in her first marriage, and she didn't want to be abused again by the state," Fair said.

We The People educational services director Joseph Cronauer said he had fond memories of Suthireung.

"She was one of the first people to talk to me when I walked through the doors; she convinced me I could find a family here," Cronauer said. "Varee was incredibly versatile and able to deal with so many different people. She proved that by being the matriarch of honor at my gay wedding in June 1994."

Suthireung is survived by her second husband, Willie Rodriguez, and two children, Dominique, 8, and Brandon, 5. The children are living with relatives, Ladds said.

A memorial service is scheduled for Dec. 29 at We The People. For more information, call (215) 545-6868. ▽

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