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Silent Givers, First in a Series, by Ollie Reed, Jr, Tribune reporter

Lou Gehrig's disease changed his life; then he and a friend joined forces to change the lives of other victims.

You couldn't find a better address for Foster Hall if you worked on it.

The man whose own heroic battle against Lou Gehrig's disease prompted the start of an organization to help those in similar straits lives in Albuquerque's Southwest Heights—on Inspiration Drive.

Michael Gray understands the aptness of that fact better than most. Meeting Hall altered his life.

"The first time I saw Foster was at a Hanukkah party in 1983," Gray said. "I was impressed that he was trying to dance with his wife."

Impressed, because Hall had to get out of a wheelchair to dance. Two years before that party, he had been found to have amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease—and told he had six months to two years to live.

But here was Hall at a party, trying to dance, trying to enjoy life.

ALS causes loss of muscular movement and the ability to speak. Mental functions are not affected by ALS but most people with ALS become totally disabled in three to five years, and many died within a few years.

After talking to Hall at this party, Gray realized this man was special.

"His voice was indistinct and hard to understand," Gray said. "But he'd look right at you and talked. If you didn't understand, he'd just say it again. I felt he had a lot to teach me about life and working with the hand life has dealt you."

Gray and Hall became good friends, often meeting at the Frontier Restaurant to talk and eat, Gray helping Hall with the latter.

In January 1993, slightly more than nine years after they met, and after Gray had come into an inheritance that allowed him to give up regular employment, they created Friends in Time Inc.

Friends in Time is a non-profit organization that today offers free services to Bernalillo, Sandoval and Valencia county residents who have ALS or multiple sclerosis, a similar but sometimes less severe neuromuscular disease.

No one knows what causes ALS or MS. Neither can be cured.

Friends in Time's goal is to make life better for people with the diseases and to give each of them as much chance as possible to live independently in the housing of their choice.

The organization's services include:

- A social worker's assessment of needs, support systems and benefit entitlements.
- A nurse who trains family or other caregivers in nutrition, medication, and dressing and moving people.
- A communication specialist and other volunteers who help in cases where speech has been impaired.
- A visiting program in which volunteers visit the acutely disabled, talk to them, read to them, do housework and yard work, and take them to appointments or recreational activities.
- In-service training, workshop presentations and public speaking aimed at public

awareness and education.

Gray, 54, is president of the Friends in Time Board, Hall, 51, is vice president.

Their partnership has melded Gray's resources and mobility with Hall's knowledge of what it means to live with a severe disability. Together, they visit people with ALS and MS and talk to caregivers, who are often in need of as much support as are those with the disease.

"Why it makes sense for us to go together is that Foster sees the need but is unable to communicate," Gray said. "That's where I come in. I can translate."

* * *

"What's that again?"

Hall, Gray and Friends in Time executive director Pat Simons are sitting in the living room of Hall's house on Inspiration Drive.

They have met to meditate and to discuss Tibetan Buddhist Writer Tarthang Tulku's "Mastering Successful Work," a book they find helpful in meeting the day-to-day challenges of running Friends in Time.

Hall has just said something, but Gray—one of the few people who can usually understand him—didn't quite catch it.

"Most people in Foster's position usually give up trying to talk. They would be mortified," Gray said. "But he's always pushing the envelope. Meditation helps me understand Foster. You just have to be patient and wait for the thread so you can pick up the words."

He listens as Hall repeats his sentences. He understands this time, and smiles.

"Foster said that what he wanted me to do was start a Buddhist temple," Gray said. "He said any growth in (Friends in Time) is my fault, that he only had the answers to some questions and that he has been trying to retire ever since."

Not true. If Hall were the quitting kind, he could have given up years ago and few would have blamed him.

Besides having trouble communicating, he has very little use of his limbs. He can't stand up by himself. He can't do a lot of things by himself. Much of his time is spent in a motorized wheelchair, which he is quick to call "a lemon."

But lemon or not, he admits, "When I'm up in my wheelchair, I almost feel like a normal person."

Instead of quitting, Hall visits and encourages people with ALS and MS, testifies before policy-making panels, teams up with Gray to give workshops and do instructional skits and, with the help of a computer, formats Friends in Time's newsletter.

He rides his wheelchair up to 10 miles round trip from home and has had only one collision with a car.

"I got hit by a little old lady who was used to driving on Sundays," he said. "It was a Monday."

Humor has sustained Hall in a life that has always been on the front lines in the war against poverty, illness and death.

He grew up in Aurora, Ill, not far from Chicago, one of numerous adopted and foster children in a Salvation Army family.

"Foster gave sermons on street corners when he was a teen-ager," Gray said.

Hall was a crew chief on an Army helicopter in Vietnam during the war. People died in his arms.

He came to Albuquerque in 1973 to work as a registered nurse at Presbyterian Hospital. He worked at several medical facilities here until 1981, when he was found to have ALS.

He took the news that he had at most two years to live better than most.

“Being a nurse,” he said, “I knew that what the doctor tells you is not necessarily true. I’ve seen many miracles. I thought I would either get well in two years or die. But nooooo.”

Hall has short, thinning hair, a close cropped graying beard and glasses. He is the father of three sons, but he is divorced now and living with a roommate. He has a new idea about ALS.

“Foster’s theory about the disease,” Gray said, “is that if you can survive the first three years, you can live—if you want to.”

Hall’s living.

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Gray grew up in Montreal and moved to Albuquerque in 1978. He has a master’s degree in computer science from the University of New Mexico and was director of UNM’s computer labs for a time.

He is a lanky 6 feet 5 inches, with dark, collar-length hair, a black mustache and glasses. Married for a second time, he is the father of 1- and 5-year old boys and stepfather of a 16-year-old son.

His mother suffered from Alzheimer’s disease in her last years, and he still feels guilty because it was his sister who took care of her.

He thinks that guilt gave him the incentive to become involved in a program that cares for other people.

But it was more than just that.

Meeting Hall was one thing.

“He exemplified the person who can continue to live a fruitful life with a severe disability and still be concerned with others in a similar plight,” Gray said. “Foster’s heroic and ardent effort to stay independent was the model for Friends in Time.”

Another thing was the six months in 1991 he spent at the Nyingma Institute, a Tibetan Buddhist facility in Berkeley, Calif.

“It changed my life,” he said. “It made me aware that I could make my own definition of what constitutes a successful human being.”

Gray lives modestly, putting some of his own money and most of his energy into Friends in Time. But there have been paybacks.

“It helped me move in the direction of being more connected with people and the world,” he said. “It made me realize that, well, I can have children.”

He became a father for the first time at 49.

Gray has, in fact, become more closely connected to life while dealing daily with life-threatening diseases.

“A lot of people I work with die,” he said. “Ten to fifteen people that Foster and I have visited on a weekly basis have died. But my perspective is that it may be time for some people and they find a way to say goodbye.”

Not time for Foster Hall thought. Right now, besides all he does with Friends in Time, Hall is studying so that he can be certified to work as a teacher and therapist with brain-damaged children.

“Foster has often said that what he misses most is being able to work,” Gray said.

Besides this is work Hall could do at home, at the house on a street called Inspiration.