Bob Hattoy Remembered

March 13, 2007 By Sean Strub

Since learning of Bob Hattoy's death on March 3, I've had a movie about Bob Hattoy running in the back of my brain. It features bursts of Bob's uplifting laughter interspersed with memories of his needle-sharp, self-deprecating wit. He was always fast, on top of the news before anyone else. When Bob was on, no one was more constantly tuned into the news cycle or more creatively processing how it was—or could be—received by the public. I see CNN as a constant in the background of the Hattoy movie in my mind.

He would say "did you read in the paper this morning that…" and I immediately felt like a slacker for not having read the paper, or that paper, yet that day. There was rarely any lag time between the news of the moment and Bob's quick quip. Sometimes I would hear something in the news and my first thought would be "boy, is Hattoy going to have fun with that!"

Bob would read or watch the news, dream up the clever comment and devise a politically strategic response simultaneously. That was one role he must have been genetically pre-destined to play, because few others did it as well.

The news is different now—all of it—because there's no longer the possibility that Hattoy will ring me up or IM me with a "did you see the story about…" which inevitably led to my laughter. His absence is palpable, as though those of us with AIDS—those of us who believe in lives of activism and service and passion—lost a part of our own bodies, a part of our voice. Bob spoke for us. Bob never betrayed us.

The government betrayed us. Our families, our schools and our faith traditions betrayed us. Democrats and Republicans alike continue to betray us. Even gay activist groups and our own AIDS organizations—the ones our blood and bodies built—have betrayed us at times. But Bob never did, even when he lived hand to mouth and worried about losing his job. Even when the IRS froze his bank accounts. Even when his personal life was a mess. Even when he could have sold out, morally or financially, and no one else would have ever known.

"Hattoy" is what we all called him. I can imagine he was called "Hattoy" in kindergarten. His boyfriends called him Hattoy. The President called him Hattoy. I'm guessing his Mom called him Hattoy.

I never felt I was funny enough for Bob, but he never made me feel like I wasn't keeping up my end of the conversation. He was a seriously funny public personality. Combined with the recent

deaths of funny women Ann Richards and Molly Ivins, the national Democratic political scene is facing one major humor deficit for years to come.

Most of the press following Bob's death has focused on his historic speech at the 1992 Democratic Convention in New York and his service as the Clinton administration's official off-message guy. He was to the Clinton Administration what Midge Costanza was to the Carter Administration. Beloved by their constituencies, good for a guaranteed great soundbite and too beloved by their respective Presidents to ever get in really serious trouble. Activists through and through.

Bob leaves multiple legacies of activism. For years, I thought of him as the most senior openly gay guy in the green movement. Bob was the Sierra Club to a lot of gay activists. He was an evangelical for the earth and saw the gay community as the constituency he was sent to convert.

A few years ago, California Governor Gray Davis appointed him to the California Fish & Game Commisison, which he promptly joked he would work to rename the "Swish and Fish Commission." The post was unpaid and required hundreds of hours of work, with more than a dozen public hearings each year, site inspections, lobbying and other responsibilities.

But there was one perquisite that Bob really liked. It was a gold and silver badge that came with the office, pinned inside a neat leather wallet. As a Commissioner, he had some fish and game-related law enforcement responsibilities (or so he claimed) and with little prompting, he would pull out his badge and flash it like the guys on Dragnet. After he was appointed to the Commission, he always carried that badge with him. Sometimes, in restaurants, he would joke that he could pull out the badge and demand to inspect the fish in the kitchen. It was always funny, particularly because there was also always a chance that was exactly what he was about to do.

In recent months, he was working on the California Marine Protection Act, creating huge expanses of sea that are like protected state parkland, only underwater. It was an historic victory and Bob deserves much of the credit. In February, he was elected Chairman of the Fish and Game Commission, which pleased him.

Whenever one repeats a Hattoy story, there is an obligation to insert the disclaimer that Bob stretch the truth as often as he stretched to tie his shoes. Daily. He didn't explicitly claim his stories were necessarily the absolute truth, but there was always some kind of truth in each of them. Bob was a really great storyteller and, as is so often the case with the peak of this profession, a great story always has a little room for improvement. Bob usually found that room and, if it wasn't there, he would build it, assembling punch lines with the enthusiasm of a kid assembling Legos. Sometimes the parts he built dwarfed the origin of the story, which would be relegated to service as the required kernel of truth.

Some of the "Hattoy stories" that have been emailed around in recent days are heard in multiple versions, like the story about a conversation he claimed to have had with President Clinton concerning the nature of glory holes. There's a version where DeeDee Myers, who was the White House Press Secretary, called him from the Oval Office (Tom Viola's version reprinted below).

There's another version when it was one-on-one between Bob and the President in the backseat of a limousine. And then there's a version where it was a social occasion, a lot of alcohol was involved and the President was getting on Bob about his social life, which Bob never could quite keep private.

The real story—or even if it ever happened—doesn't really matter. Bob was a storyteller and his friends all knew it. But at the same time, on a political level, in terms of his commitment to his community, his loyalty as an ally, he never had any stories. He was the true-believing foundation upon which movements are made and heroes are borne. No one questioned Bob's integrity as an activist.

His personal finances were another matter, complicated by his utter indifference to material accumulation, unbridled generosity with anyone he felt was in need (friend or stranger alike) a natural affinity for irresponsibility and, for a number of years, the belief that he was soon to die and it didn't really matter how much he was in debt.

He had a serious tax problem in the late 1980's and at one point reached a settlement with the Internal Revenue Service that had him making a monthly payment. Over the course of 20 years, he would pay off what was due. He claimed that when he spoke at the convention and overnight became a public person, the IRS sent him a letter and called him in for a discussion. Because he had AIDS, they did not feel he was going to live long enough to pay off what he owed them and therefore they needed to speed up the payment schedule.

After the Clinton administration, Bob developed an addiction to crystal methamphetamine. He shared his struggle for recovery with his friends. "If the devil had invented a drug to lure gay men, it would be crystal" he said. Whether it the loneliness that plagued him his entire life, a post-White House letdown from the heady years, or processing the pain of a complicated childhood, Bob got sucked into the crystal subculture and his stories developed a tragic pathos.

But Bob was clean for at least the last several years of his life—one of his closest friends claims it was almost four years, another said nearly three—and I know he was proud of his recovery, even though it had its own bumps along the way. Bob's struggle with crystal demanded that he finally become an activist in his own life, prioritizing it above the obligations he felt to the planet and his people. That was new to Bob.

In the Bob movie in my mind, I see him defiantly closing his speech with the immortal cry of our movement, "ACT UP! FIGHT BACK! FIGHT AIDS!" and I see the pride in his eyes when he would recount how many days, or weeks, or months he had been off crystal.

Many activists—myself included—were unhappy that the Kerry campaign had no "Friend of John" with AIDS. So far, no one has emerged as a "Friend of Hillary" or "Friend of Barack" of friend with AIDS of any of the other candidates in an important public way. They all know people with AIDS and may have personal friends, but they haven't put anyone forth in a public way and made a commitment to them, and by extension to our community, that they will be smarter, more

responsive and more urgent in their response to the epidemic.

We need these friends—people who are trusted by the community, with a track record of truth-telling—to be important and public parts of the presidential campaigns. Because the Clinton campaign made Bob so public and because Bob had so much integrity, we had confidence that we were heard at high levels in the administration.

They must represent us to and speak for us in the campaigns, not represent the campaigns to us and "manage" the AIDS movement as a constituency. The absence of such a person in the Kerry campaign was costly for our movement and it was largely engineered by gay politicos who aggressively shunted aside the voices of people with AIDS. We were urged to just stay quiet until after the election, hidden away like some grotesque relation kept in the attic.

We are a very small minority and as the epidemic has become less white and moved into the poverty pockets of our society, our voice has become smaller. For us to be heard, for us to have a voice in the decision-making processes that impact our lives, we must rely on people who are HIV negative and are concerned about us to make sure we are present. We cannot do it without them. We don't want them to speak for us; we want their help to make sure we are present to speak for ourselves.

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Howard Grossman, longtime HIV clinician: "Once Bob was at the gym and a young queen was doing curls and talking on his cell phone. He turned to Bob and said "Aren't you a little old to be here?" The gym went quiet—as the comment was widely heard—but Hattoy didn't miss a beat and responded "I used to be a competitor but now I'm a judge and I judge that you're a loser!" The young guy just got out of there ASAP.

Keith Boykin, activist and writer who worked with Bob in the White House: Bob was always "getting in trouble just for speaking the truth."

Mark Aurigemma, former ACT UPper: "I remember a particularly hysterical evening at a party during the convention in which Bob was frantically trying to come up with ideas for a different theme song for the Clinton campaign, because "Don't' Stop Thinking About Tomorrow" was catching on and he couldn't bear to see Bill and Hillary bopping around to it any longer!"

Patrick Nolen, Bob's assistant at the White House: "I first met "Hattoy"—the term used by both Bob himself and those around him—in December of 1991, at a gay bar called The Front Runner in Manchester, New Hampshire, not long before the New Hampshire primary. Nearly a year later, freshly dumped by my boyfriend, estranged from my family for being gay and mourning the loss of my 14 year old dog, I faked mono, packed two suitcases and boarded a train to Washington, DC. Two days later, I donned my then-best work outfit and showed up to volunteer at the Clinton Transition Team. As a dirt poor twenty-something, I was thrilled to be a part of something so exciting, I took whatever task they gave me. Opening mail in a window-less office, I was elated. At

a soda machine, I turned around and was greeted with “Oh my God! New Hampshire! What are YOU doing here?” Before I could say a word, Hattoy turned to George Stephanopoulous, who was with him, said “I’ll talk to you later!” then grabbed me by the arm and said “Come with me, I need an assistant.” He called Stephanopolous “George Grouchanopolous” sometimes.

“Sixteen hour days, seven days a week, there was never enough time in a day to do all that Hattoy had hoped to accomplish. Into our office paraded a virtual Who’s Who of Democratic Party politics. Hattoy and I started to do our part to staff the Clinton Administration with as many gay people as we could. Across soon-to-be Under Secretary for HUD Roberta Achtenberg’s resume, Hattoy scrolled, “HIRE HER! SHE IS THE BEST!” On resume after resume, Hattoy moved as many as he could to the top of the stack in the Director’s office and we worked to represent the gay community from within. We were the “quota queens” as people were coming to us saying “we need a gay person at Commerce, etc.”

“Once he introduced me to Larry Kramer as “The nice, gay Eve Harrington of Democratic politics.” Never having seen the movie, I faked a smile and laughed. The next day I rented it from Blockbuster and shoed up the next morning with Hattoy’s morning coffee cooing, “Good morning, Miss CHanning!” and I took one of his award plaques, held it close to my chest and proceeded to bow and thank an imaginary audience, as Eve Harrington did at the very end of All About Eve.” Hattoy cackled, shook his head, rolled his eyes and giggled. “Oh shit, what have I don! I can’t be a has-been because I am still technically a never-was!”

Right after the Inauguration I showed up at the Transition Team headquarters and it was nearly empty, everything was getting packed up by the movers. I felt sad. Suddenly, Hattoy walked in and said, “Grab your jacket! We’re going to the White House!” “For tea?” I asked. “No! To work, you’re hired!” he barked. When we first walked into the White House, it was awe-inspiring. I could not believe I was there. We smirked at each other and I said, “Bob! Let’s kiss each other so we can tell our friends we were the first openly gay people to make-out in The White House!” Bob rolled his eyes and we ‘air-kissed’ each other on the cheek and burst into laughter. Given the recent Anita Hill sexual harassment scanal, we laughed and then decided to dry hump for a split-second and tell our grandchildren we were the first gays to get it on in the White House!”

“I used to chase him down the hall trying to shove a sandwich in his hand so he would eat properly. I felt like a nagging caretaker sometimes because I naively thought “If I just keep him eating well, he’l get better!” Ironically, Hattoy gained a lot of weight but then—vintage Hattoy—exclaimed, “I am going to be the first HIV+ man to die of obesity!”

“Every time Bob went off-message, he got grief, but not lethal “I’m gonna fucking kill you grief”. There was quickly a resigned “there you go again” attitude and it was evident that it was going to be impossible to muzzle Hattoy. They wen through the motions, but there is no way they could do it. Clinton never would have fired him and they (others in the White House) knew it. He loved Bob, for the same reasons we all did. Bob was a damn good political strategist, too. I remember once when (James) Carville gave a speech to the Victory Fund and, Bob claimed, intentionally showed his “package”. It was a great speech, too.”

Deacon Maccubbin, owner, Lambda Rising Bookstore in Washington, DC: “I was leafing through the VIP books we keep at Lambda Rising, books which contain the notes and signatures of thousands of authors, politicians, athletes, activists and other leaders who have passed through our bookstore in the past 33 years. And there was an entry from Bob, made in late January 1993 as we were all celebrating the inauguration of the “Man from Hope” and the rejection of the anti-gay, AIDS-phobic Republican administration that preceded it. It was this spirit of optimism that was with Bob when he entered our bookstore that day and it shows in his entry: “Hi guys—Well, well, well, we won. In “fucking”-credible! (don’t quote me on that). I think this year has been one of hope, anticipation and a willingness to change. I hope we will now that _we_ have “friends” in charge.” He may have been a national public figure, a member of the President’s team, but he still spoke plainly and honestly, pulling no punches. “I love Lambda Rising, as a bookstore, a place to smile at cute men…,” he continued. “Thanks for the home away from home.”

As I read the entry last night, I conjured up a mental image of this impish bundle of energy with the big open smile and the laugh in his voice. I thought that I should track him down in California and catch up on his life, see how he was doing. Unfortunately, today’s sad news tells me that it’s too late for that, but not too late to remember his dedication to the planet, to the glbt community, and to people living with HIV/AIDS. Though presidents and politics failed to live up to our optimism, Bob Hattoy never failed us at all.”

Eric Sawyer (who shared a house on Fire Island with Hattoy, Bob Pelham and Victor Zonana, who was another Clinton appointee): There were many a weekend’s conversation and many a calls during the week that began with Bob saying, “I never said this but, I thought you should know that the administration is considering X and I am sure that you are not happy with this. The Domestic Policy Chief is behind this stupid idea and his direct phone number, which you got from an unknown source, is 202-xxx-xxxx. He is deathly afraid that the activist response may be to do such and such, so be sure to threaten to do so immediately.”

David Mixner, another openly-gay Friend of Bill’s, referring to Bob’s speech at the 1992 Democratic Convention: “The hall was in the usual hubbub that passes for normal even when speeches are going on. But as Bob Hattoy mounted the podium, stillness fell over the entire place. One by one, the delegates stood up, until all five thousand people were on their feet in respect. The hush was palpable. When he paused, looked over the crowd, and said “This is difficult” he won the hearts of a nation. There was not a dry eye in the nation that night. Those of us in the hall had black armbands to honor those we knew who had died of ADIS and held onto each other as he spoke. It was as if at last we were finally being heard after a decade of horror, death and abandonment. Bob did us all proud that night.”

Bob to the LA Times: “I didn’t come to Washington to be a faceless federal bureaucrat. I came to Washington to be a bureaucrat in your face.”

Jackie McCort, a Sierra Club colleague of Bob’s: “In 1992, the Sierra Club field staffers were having their national meeting together at Tomales Bay in Northern California, when Bob spoke at the Democratic Convention. We gathered around the TV together that night, so thrilled and touched

that “one of our own” was speaking so eloquently to the American people! There were few dry eyes in that room, I can tell you. Doggone, we were proud! Rest in peace, Brother Bob. You did a LOT for the world and you loved people. I am glad you go to keep good hair until the end, too!”

Torie Osborn, longtime community activist and Senior Advisor to Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa: “Has anyone noticed how since Bob died how distinctly unwitty most people are? I am noticing this about myself daily and missing him all the more.”

Kate Shindle, Miss America, 19xx: “I remember when Bob came to my outgoing Miss America Pageant in September of 1998, just days after I opined, in the press, that Clinton should resign if he lied under oath. Don’t think I didn’t get an earful about that at Atlantic City’s most fabulous gay bar! hope the loss of Bob will remind people that there are still deaths occurring from this virus. I think it would be a fitting tribute to him if his death reignited the AIDS movement and drew some of his friends and acquaintances back into the fray.

William Waybourn, Windows Media Founder and former head of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund: “After the 1992 elections, the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund and other groups created Coalition ’93 to promote openly lesbian and gay candidates for the incoming Clinton Administration. We compiled a pool of resumes from more than 1200 qualified and diverse individual sfrom around the country. Bob treated us as if we were a carry-out delicatessen: “I need two persons with aeronautical backgrounds for NASA, one military type for the Departmetn of Defense, and three with medical and public heatlh service for Health & Human Services. Hold the feather boas on the DOD one.” Twice a day or more, Bob and I would confer on possible openings and I would pull the appropriate resumes and deliver them to him. Bob then forewarded them to the committees for placement. After so many years of Reagan/Bush, the competeition for these jobs was fierce and almost every group had scores of potential appointees lined up. But many of our applicants got there first because Bob took upon himself to track down committee members to promote each applicant. Of the more than 100 GLBT indivdiauls placed with the incoming administration in those early months, almost all were shepherded by Bob.”

Scott Hitt, MD, former Chair of the Presidential Advisory Commission on HIV/AIDS: “Clinton had promised ANGLE (a gay political lobby based in LA) that there would be a PWA speaking during prime time at the Convention. H owever the handlers started to slowly chip away at the promise. But Bob would have nothing of it . He demanded the prime time slot and when they tried to have the speaker be Elizabeth Glaser, a straight white woman, we insisted at least one of the speakers be a gay man. This issue would not be sanitized. Bob did not let us down.”

Larry Kramer: “He was gutsy and he hung in there even when his “friend” Bill Clinton treated him like shit”

Joint statement of former President Bill Clinton and Senator Hillary Clinton: We have lost a pioneer, a leader, and a friend. Bob Hattoy devoted his life to the fight for civil rights and social justice for the gay community and people living with AIDS. We will always be grateful for his courageous and moving speech at the 1992 Democratic National Convention and afterward, for his

years of dedicated service in the administration. He gave hope to a community that feared their voice would never be heard at the highest levels of government. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family and friends."

Bob Pelham, Bob Hattoy's former partner, reported to me that President Clinton called him and spoke to him for a few minutes and was kind, consoling and his voice cracked "I thought he was crying" Pelham said.

Tom Viola, Executive Director of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS: "I was never sure I was keeping up with his end of the conversation, but the half I could follow include some hilarious, impeccable and often eye-rolling opinions, stories and details, perhaps best exemplified by his "story" of being called by DeeDee Myers from the Oval Office to explain to President Clinton over the phone the concept of a glory hole. "Could you put a pussy up to one of those?" he claimed the President asked." (There are multiple versions of this particular story, as it was one of Bob's favorites and it, undoubtedly, grew taller with each telling).

Nita Sault-Salazar, a lifelong friend who grew up with Bob and his siblings in Anaheim: One time when I went out to lunch with Bobby, while he was working for (Los Angeles City Councilman) Zev Yaroslavsky, I got in the passenger seat of his car and Bob reached over to the glove compartment to get his wallet. When he opened the glove compartment, about 100 crumpled parking tickets fell out onto my lap, but he ignored them and just kept digging around for his wallet. I just laughed and thought "that's just Bobby", as 100 parking tickets did not phase him at all. Funny how he could be so brilliant, quick-witted and yet wildly irresponsible, like that line about their not being much separation between genius and crazy.

Bob's parents were friends with my parents since 1940. He was my friend and a teenage co-conspirator with my brother, Jon. I was the tag-along little sister. He came to every play, opera or musical I performed in and was so encouraging and supportive. But the biggest impact on my life was how he followed his heart and was so open and honest about whom he was. Bobby was in a group of people who were brave. Because of brave people like Bobby and other oepnely gay people I am a more knowledgeable, understanding, caring, kind, open and loving mother who is teaching her children that loving one another—regardless of sexuality, race or religion—is the most important part of life. Because of brave openly gay people like Bobby, heterosexual people are gaining more understanding of the gay community and the AIDS epidemic. This awareness has helped me raise my children with tolerance, love and understanding. So the biggest and most important impact Bobby had on my life is that his honesty and bravery helped make me a better mother.

Paddy McGuire, Oregon state director of the 1992 Clinton campaign: "There was a big rally in downtown Portland (over 10,000 people) in opposition to a series of anti-gay measures on the ballot in the 1992 general election. The Clinton campaign was asked to send someone to speak and Hattoy, who was in town working with the green community, was the logical choice. We spend 24 hours trying to get a statement cleared through the national campaign folks in Little Rock. Finally, with 30 minutes to go, Bob comes into my office and tells me he has a cleared statement.

We immediately leave for the rally, Bob goes on, introdues himself and begins “I have a telegram from Governor Clinton.” He reads this beautiful, eloquent statement against the anti-gay Oregon ballot measure. He leaves the stage to a roar from the crowd. I hug him and ask him for a copy of the statement (since I knew the press would want it and I wanted it as a keepsake). He hands me the paper. It was blank. Nothing had been approved by Little Rock. He had made it up on the spot. Vintage Bob. He had more guts than I could ever hope to. We have all lost a lot.”

Elliott Millenson, developer of the home access HIV test: “This is probably the first time Bob made anybody sad.”

The Liberty Hill Foundation, a favorite progressive cause of Bob’s, has established a fund in Bob’s honor. It will be used to fund the LGBT and environmental groups Bob loved. Checks should be written to “Liberty Hill Foundation” with a notation for the “Hattoy Memorial Fund” and sent to:

Liberty Hill Foundation
2121 Cloverfield Blvd. #113
Santa Monica, CA 90404

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