Editor’s Letter

November 1, 1999 By Walter Armstrong

There was a time when I felt awful about being spared from AIDS while so many other, worthier gay men were not. I am more forgiving now. But there is one person I still don’t feel all right about having survived.

AIDS robbed me of an irreplaceable friend, Rand Snyder, in July 1996. Rand had a gift for life, and honored it by keeping it safe from the grotesque “complications” that tormented his body and turned his last two years into a hell. How he did this is a mystery.

I met, and fell in love with, Rand in 1988 in ACT UP. The photograph below, by Ben Thornberry, shows Rand and me that October on the Mall in Washington, DC, after leafletting at the Quilt; early the next morning, we were two of a thousand activists who seized the FDA—a much-needed victory. I can still see Rand shimmying up the building’s flagpoles to fly ACT-UP banners. Ben’s picture brings it all back—the activism and memorials of a desperate, exhilarating, heartbreaking time when the gay community’s very survival seemed at stake. It also reminds me that what was more pressing to me right then was my suspicion that Rand was about to break up with me (he was).

If his blue eyes, golden hair and smooth, sexy body couldn’t be mine, I made do with his romantic mind. Rand was a true intellectual. An eternal graduate student at NYU, he had an unabashed passion for the Latin and ancient Greek texts he read, taught and talked on and on about. He sincerely regretted not having been born in pagan Athens, birthplace of democracy and hotbed of homosexuality. Coming of age between gay liberation and the gay plague was only a second choice.
Still, Rand cast his lot wholeheartedly with his “queer tribe” and was proud to count himself among society’s pariahs. His free spirit may have made it easy for him not to return phone calls, but it also released him from shame when AIDS disabled him. He had a great capacity for taking and sharing pleasure—in ideas and conversation, irony and camp, Charles Ludlam, Broadway divas, vampires, spicy foods, rough sex, bodysurfing, baking. ACT UP was truly a religious experience for him, and he suffered gladly the bullies, showoffs and crybabies in the room. Based on his experience of the epidemic, he believed in evil, and hated it. He was grateful to use his rage to save his beloved community and give his absurd death meaning.

Rand’s health disintegrated at the same time that ACT UP did. In 1994, after two hospitalizations and many cruel tests, he learned that the HIV in his brain was destroying the cerebellum and his muscle coordination; it was only a matter of time before the solidarity of arms, legs, throat,

bladder, heart, lungs ended. Last to fail would be his mind, and Rand and his lover, David Asher, struggled heroically each day for the next two years to make this a blessing, not a curse. Rather than mourn the loss of his abilities, they mined what was left for happiness. Imprisoned in a wheelchair, Rand kept his dignity and his daily life intact. He taught classes, went to the theater, visited friends and family, traveled the world and laughed—while David served as his hands and feet, his voice. In the process, Rand somehow moved beyond anger. Once he had wanted his corpse dropped on the White House lawn; now it was enough to be carried by his lover up the steps of the Acropolis. Was it mercy that he found?

Even slowly drowning in a coma in the hospital, my friend never did forsake his gift for life. I hate to say that on the day he died, the fear on his face was terrible to see. But David, who stayed by his side, later reported that Rand seemed ready, accepting, when he finally let go. “Love is stronger than death,” I can still hear Rand saying with seven kinds of irony, a favorite Charles Ludlam line. This October, Rand would have been 39. It’s an honor for me to dedicate the new *POZ* to his memory.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Editor-s-Letter-12015-2891