Going Home: Tom Viola

Home fires still burn in Tom Viola’s Pittsburgh

August 1, 1994 By Tim Sacco

Tom Viola has mourned more than his share of friends. As a former actor and now the managing director of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, an entertainment industry foundation that last year raised $4.3 million in the fight against AIDS, he has witnessed the devastation from front row, center.

Still, earlier this summer, he was able to put aside concerns and steal away for four days to Pittsburgh to participate in the wedding of the youngest of his three sisters.

“Barbara was 8 when I left home, so we didn’t have as much of a relationship as siblings,” Viola, 40, said. “To her, I was the big brother who was away.”

The teenage Viola left home to study musical theater at the University of Cincinnati, then headed East. New York City became his home base while he performed in dinner theater, regional theater and off-off-Broadway productions for five years before he abandoned his acting career to go to work for Ron Bernstein, a literary agent who handled such watershed works as Larry Kramer’s *Faggots* and Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance*.

“When I was working with Ron it was the first time I had entree into the gay community beyond my own friends,” Viola said.

“When my sister Barbara landed a job in New York City she moved in with me for about a year-and-a-half until she found her own place. It was really during that time that we became close,” he said.

“Her wedding was very meaningful to me, because all of the family was there, including relatives I hadn’t seen in a while.”

Viola gets to Pittsburgh about once a year, but he maintains a close relationship by telephone with his parents, Charmaine and Tullio, and with his married sister Jane, all of whom live in Pittsburgh’s northern suburbs.

“Pittsburgh is a really great city,” Viola said. "It’s lived down the horrible reputation it had as this

blackened steel town. You used to drive along the Monongahela River, toward Oakland -- the heard of the city -- and you would pass all of these steel mills, going day and night. You could see the fire and the heat radiate from these buildings. All of them are gone now. They closed them, then tore them down and put in acres of newly planted grass.

“When they began revitalizing someof the central city, they got rid of the crumbling, awful warehouses and railroad lines. Now there’s a beautiful park and brand-new office buildings. And in past decades -- basically since I’ve been away -- they’ve begun renovating some of the remaining great old buildings, several of which date from the turn of the century.”

Sightseeing wasn’t at the top of Viola’s itinerary during his visit to Pittsburgh two years ago. That was when he went home to inform his family that he was HIV positive.

“An ex-lover of mine had died of AIDS and a former college roommate and my parents were aware of that,” Viola said. “But I had been reassuring them through it all that I was fine. I went down there on some kind of zen level that it would all work out however it was going to work out,” he said.

While in town, Viola wanted to pay a courtesy call on the offices of the Pittsburgh AIDS Task Force and his father volunteered to chauffeur him.

“It was great for us as father and sun to visit the Task Force together,” Viola said. “My parents have been up to New York City for AIDS benefits I’ve organized, but neither had ever participated with me before.” He goes on. “During the time we spent at the Task Force, the scope and the importance of the work being done became clear to my father. Initially I had been irritated that he was following me around that day just because he didn’t want me to drive his car! But he told me, frankly, that he was very proud to see how people relate to me and the organization.”

Later that day, while sitting on the back porch of his parents’ suburban home, he told them he was HIV positive.

“It hasn’t in any way damaged our relationship,” Viola said. “In fact, it has deepened it.”

After his sister’s wedding this last May, Viola returned to New York City and plunged back into his work organizing AIDS fund-raisers because the need for money never abates.

“I love the work that I’m able to do, but I believe that one of the most important things we can share is our experience -- the truth about our lives. That’s just as important as any march or fund-raising event.”

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