Kentucky Woman

September 1, 2000 By Kate Black

Right before Belinda Mason died at 32 on September 9, 1991, she told her family, “Well, bye-bye y’all.” It would have been unlike Belinda not to use words to let those around her know she was passing on. She believed in the power of talk to get to the heart of the matter while passing the time, to be fun as hell and change lives. Dialogue was her medium. She could talk it or write it—in plays, stories and an unfinished novel, all set in her beloved eastern Kentucky birthplace.

I met Belinda at a party for Kentucky women writers in 1988. As she charmed me with her words, I noticed her reaching into her purse. When she brought out her clutched hand, she fumbled, spilling small white cylinders onto the floor. “Stop those pills, Katie,” she said. “That’s $75 of AZT a-rolling across the floor.” This is how I found out she had HIV.

She called herself “a small-town journalist, young mother, occasional country-music performer and reliable Tupperware- party guest.” Then she tested positive and “became ‘that girl, you know, Steve Carden’s wife, the one who’s got AIDS.’”

Belinda spent untold hours with Kentuckians, listening, laughing, educating, telling stories and being a lifeline for rural HIVers. She and Ron Jerrell cofounded the Kentuckiana People With AIDS Coalition in the late 1980s. She was a firebrand as the first PWA appointed to the National Commission on AIDS in 1989. Conscious of her relative privilege as a white, straight, insured and financially secure PWA, she understood—through her own brushes with discrimination in small towns—who ought to be talking and what needed to be said. This transfusion recipient refused to be used by the sanctimonious as a wedge between the “innocent victims” and the rest of those with HIV.

She was savvy and sophisticated, but the only thing I ever heard her brag about was the time she met Conway Twitty backstage. To Belinda, stories were essential life-forms, and she made her own serve a righteous purpose.

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