Legacy-Tom Stoddard

How the boy next door made the world a safer place for gays and lesbians

May 1, 1997 By Rich Meislin

Tom Stoddard, who died February 12 at the age of 48, demonstrated over and over that one doesn't necessarily have to shout to be heart. Brilliant, well-spoken, thoughtful, handsome, media-savvy and utterly charming, Tom mastered the art of making equal rights for gay people and people with AIDS seem increasingly sensible to a public that was, when he started, largely oblivious, fearful or hostile.

There was nothing quite like watching a calm and restrained Tom on *Crossfire* or *Larry King Live* or *Nightline,* coming off like the earnest boy next door, while at his side on the screen some right-winger frothed himself into an embarassing lather. Tom went at it with the quiet conviction that all he sought was what was fair and just. When he went into what a friend called his "we hold these truths to be self-evident mode," change happened.

People routinely cite as the most prominent of Tom's achievements his authorship of the landmark gay-rights legislation that became law in New York City in 1986 or his building of the staff and reputation of Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund between 1986 and 1992.

While these were certainly impressive feats, perhaps more important, though harder to measure, is how he helped make a generation of Americans in the late 1970s and '80s more comfortable with gay people, and gay people more comfortable with themselves.

Tom was not one to join demonstrations or scream invective, but he was in his own way a subversive: This man who looked and talked like what every mother wanted her son to be was unabashed, proud, publicly gay. And, after a period of soul-searching, he became a public and vocal PWA as well, most notably as a *POZ* cover story (October/November 1995). The lessons he learned, the contacts he made from lobbying for civil rights and gay rights, the sense of reason he developed were turned to the AIDS front; he became, as he put it, the client as well as the lawyer.

Tom was fortunate to avoid the hospital for more than seven years after his AIDS diagnosis--a credit in part to a combination of good genes, good treatment and good luck, but certainly due also to his unshakable determination and hope. He ran and exercised with a discipline that put his friends with uncompromised immune systems to shame. He tried every new drug regimen that held promise, even as his sense of justice moved him to publicly denounce the state of affairs in

which these advances were available only to people with wealth or good insurance.

The drugs were often tortuous, but he was occasionally able to view them as something of a hopeful adventure: I will always remember his unabashed gloating about how his testosterone treatments, combined with his usual workout routine, were giving him the body he only dreamed of having as an 18 year old.

Nor can I forget his grimly humorous caution against too much optimism that protease cocktails, getting rave reviews in the press, would help him: “Oh, my viruses are so old and so sophisticated,” he said, his voice trailing off.

Tom’s favorite quotation came from Theodore Parker, a 19th-Century Unitarian minister: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” It sums up the balance between optimism and struggle that characterized Tom’s work.

“I’ve been very lucky,” Tom told me the day before he died. “I always got back more than I gave.”

I replied that if he felt that way, he could not possibly understand how much he gave, and to how many. With his death, I keep thinking of another quotation I spotted a while back that made me stop and think of Tom, from the 19th-Century historian Henry Adams: “The teacher affects eternity. He can never tell where his influence stops.”

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