Life After Legacy

This Lazarus learned he wanted to leave something behind: himself

March 1, 1999 By Dennis DeLeon

Before AIDS, I was one of the world's many lawyer- careerists extraordinaire, always building that résumé for the future and never burning a bridge. I relished making money and playing a lawyer's behind-the-scenes role as much as I did giving advice to clients.

All of this changed when I tested positive in 1986. While I had many reactions, one main concern shifted to leaving a legacy. Although my life had been pretty fulfilling to me, I realized that as far as my extended Latino family was concerned, I would be remembered as just another government lawyer and *pato (*faggot) who died of AIDS.

To understand why a grown man cares about what his family thinks, you need to know something about my father and many other Latino men. He is the oldest of three brothers and two sisters. To this day, the brothers are always competing, comparing themselves to one another to determine who is the most successful. Even in their old age they still secretly love any weakness or failure in the others.

Over the years this bond of envy has expanded to include their children's accomplishments. Stories of what the next generation has achieved have long kept the brothers holding their heads high during deLeon family gatherings. As the oldest *hermano*, my father is especially sensitive to these face-saving tactics in the testosterone-filled deLeon brotherhood.

At first after testing positive, I adopted (rather mechanically) my father's mind-set and set out looking for opportunities that would be seen as leaving something behind for my family and me. First, I got appointed as the deputy borough president of Manhattan. While the position had responsibilities, it wasn't the most strenuous post—my taking it was a little like the scene near the end of *The Wizard of Oz* in which the Cowardly Lion is awarded a medal of courage. Regardless, my father, ecstatic, sent out clippings from the local Spanish-language newspaper that announced the appointment. He seemed annoyed that there wasn't more publicity.

Soon I rectified that situation—by becoming the chair of New York City's Human Rights Commission in 1990, my name began appearing in the papers regularly: This helped to burnish my father's image as the *hermano numero uno* in the viper's nest of loving siblings I call my *familia*. And he was genuinely proud of me, which was great.

Of course, this desire to leave a legacy was not solely a function of the deLeon evolutionary struggle for familial dominance. I also wanted to leave something—anything—behind in my own right. Mentions of my work in newspapers and on television helped to do that. I didn't want to die unknown, without an obituary in *The New York Times*.

I'm not proud of this desire. Let's face it—it's shallow and throws a spotlight on a fundamental insecurity in my character. In addition, it belies a serious misunderstanding of why people are remembered after they die. As I eventually came to understand, it's not how many clippings you accumulate, but how many lives you touch.

Since 1994, 1 have run a small agency that provides services to those in the Latino community affected by AIDS. I took the job thinking it would be my last—my health was declining, and the agency's environment was very supportive.

Well, I'm still here. But I generate few press releases these days—much to the displeasure (unspoken) of my father.

The irony is, I've recently come full circle: I now worry less about my legacy and more about my career. But therein lies the problem—for all practical purposes, I no longer have one. While I've had some great jobs over the past decade, the price of feeding the legacy machine was to leave me in an employment nowheresville.

So what next? No law firm will hire a 50-year-old with HIV who hasn't practiced law in years. But I can't continue to run a small AIDS agency forever, especially given the public's declining interest in the disease. Learning to cope with such uncertainty is the new name of the survivor game. I guess that's the price you pay for not dying when you're supposed to.

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