Media

Whatever happened to the New York Times and AIDS?

April 1, 1994 By Mark Schoofs

The world's most influential newspaper is searching for a new AIDS voice. The *New York Times*' Jeffrey Schmalz died last November of the disease he covered, but sources at the paper confirm the *Times* is committed to keeping the beat which the openly HIV positive Schmalz pioneered.

Two cheers. If we get the kind of AIDS journalism Schmalz practiced for most of his career, that's all the *Times* will deserve. But if the paper continues the course Schmalz set from the grave in his last, posthumously published article, then the *Times* will have earned a full ovation.

Like the newspaper Schmalz practically personified (he wore bow ties and Oxford shirts and never worked anywhere else), Schmalz publicly entered the AIDS fray late. In 1990, an AIDS-related seizure felled the 17-year *Times* veteran smack in the middle of the newsroom, thus outing him as both HIV positive and gay. After he recovered, Schmalz asked to write about AIDS and gay rights, and the *Times* -- under its new, less homophobic leadership -- agreed.

Schmalz excelled at profiles, interviewing such prominent people with AIDS as Mary Fisher, Randy Shilts, Elizabeth Glaser and Magic Johnson (the last, according to longtime friend and *USA Today* reporter Adam Nagourney, was one of his favorite pieces). In telling the story of AIDS through famous, or at least familiar, people, Schmalz humanized the disease. He made readers who were ignorant, even hostile, more likely to care about the epidemic.

Schmalz was exploring his own predicament, of course, which is what gave his profiles their extra luminosity, like a flash that takes a long time to fade from the mind's eye. In a first-person account published less than a year before he died, Schmalz turned his journalistic spotlight directly on himself, exposing what it was like both to have AIDS and to report on it. In that piece, one of his most memorable, he recalled interviewing Bob Hattoy, one of two people with AIDS to address the Democratic National Convention in the summer of 1992. Hattoy blithely told Schmalz that AIDS "isn't overwhelming me." Schmalz didn't buy it.

I knew from my own experience the nightmares of waking up in a coffin, of wondering whether every cold was the big one that would do me in. I challenged him for not being honest, and he broke down. I wanted to hold him. I wanted to apologize. Then he hit me as hard as I hit him.

“I think I will probably die of AIDS,” he blurted out. “Won’t you?”

Such passionate writing in the usually dispassionate *Times* recaptured the media’s attention -- albeit briefly -- when tactics such as activists’ protests were becoming less and less effective.

What Schmalz didn’t do, however, was go after AIDS as Woodward and Bernstein went after Watergate. As one colleague put it, “Jeff reported better on his previous assignments, but he wrote his best on AIDS.” The result was a body of work more elegiac than incendiary, more sentimental than useful.

Until, that is, his last piece. In a Sunday magazine cover story titled, “Whatever happened to AIDS?,” Schmalz tried to rouse a nation from its complacency, from its defeatist acceptance of AIDS as an immovable “part of the landscape.” It was his best piece of work -- urgent and implacable. It didn’t aim just to describe the epidemic; it aimed to end the epidemic or at least to shorten it. And it did make an impact. In a speech on World AIDS Day, President Clinton cited the article and concurred with its criticisms, even those of his own Administration.

It was this article which made *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan’s memorial tribute to Schmalz, which hit the stands just a day later, jangle so discordantly. “Sometimes,” Sullivan wrote, “his anger got the better of his later journalism.”

Huh?

As the effectiveness of his furious last article proves, Schmalz should have channeled more anger into his writing. I don’t mean that Schmalz should have become Larry Kramer, screaming without fear or favor. The wrath of a reporter is completely different from the wrath of an activist. A reporter’s anger doesn’t explode. It’s quiet, grim, relentless. A furious activist rants; a furious reporter investigates.

Friends and colleagues say that Schmalz was moving toward exactly this expression of his rage, that if AIDS had given him more time we would have seen more hard-hitting dispatches and investigative reports. In short, more fury and less elegy. More matter and less art. This is the beat and the Schmalz legacy that the *Times* should continue.

If it does, it could rake a lot of much. As Schmalz’s close friend and fellow *Times* veteran David Dunlap notes, the race for a cure is “an incredibly high-stakes undertaking and one that would richly repay journalistic investigation.” Indeed it would as would unraveling why people of color die faster than whites, why gay men have higher rates of KS than other people with AIDS and a thousand other questions, all of which beg one more question: Why haven’t the *Times* and other mainstream papers pursued such stories with the vigor they deserve? After all, as Dunlap points out, the burden of AIDS reporting “shouldn’t fall onto a single pair of shoulders.”

The top editors at the *New York Times*, Max Frankel and Joe Lelyveld, declined to be interviewed for this article, but the usual reasons editors give -- that investigative reporting is difficult and

expensive -- boil down to this: AIDS still affects mostly gays and people of color, which means that the vast majority of reporters and editors “haven’t had anyone close to them die of AIDS,” as Nagourney puts it. In this context, Nagourney adds, "Jeff’s death was almost as important as his life. This person, who was so much a part of the *Times* family, died at 39. This was stunning to people."

Maybe, just maybe, it stunned folks at the *New York Times* enough. When people talk about who the *Times* will tap as Schmalz’s successor, some insist the paper should choose someone else who’s HIV positive. Others point out that being gay and a minority is important, as is having a degree in science. But if the paper takes to heart the deepest lessons of Schmalz’s life and death, they’ll take an HIV negative, straight, white male with any old degree, providing he has just one quality: a reporter’s true fury.

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