Obits

May 1, 1999

VERNON “COPY” BERG, 47, an artist and one of the first to challenge a military discharge on the grounds of homosexuality, died of AIDS January 27. In 1975, Berg successfully sued the Navy to dispute his “other than honorable” discharge. As a result the armed forces began granting honorable discharges to gay personnel. In 1998, at an on-campus Rutgers University exhibit, Berg had another run-in with controversy, this time with students who objected to the sexual content of photographs taken by his lover, Marcus Leatherdale, one of which showed Berg masturbating. “They don’t see AIDS as relevant to them,” Berg told POZ in an interview last October. “I presented masturbation as an alternative to a death sentence. They thought I was just showing off.”

RYAN NAKAGAWA, 40, chief ethics officer of Los Angeles’ Metropolitan Transportation Commission, died of AIDS January 11. Prior to his job with the MTC, Nakagawa served as policy advisor to then-state controller Gray Davis, now California’s governor, and served on the LA County Judicial Procedures Commission. “Ryan was a true diplomat,” said his partner James Litz. “He could speak before any group and keep his cool.” Fluent in Russian, Nakagawa was also a marathon runner. Nakagawa’s ashes will be scattered along Ka’ena Point on Oahu, his native island, in Hawaii—“where spirits depart,” Litz said.

JOHN WATSON, 44, a medical librarian and AIDS educator based in Washington, DC, died of AIDS January 16. As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s senior international multicultural liaison from 1988 to 1996, Watson trained international AIDS educators. He also helped develop the CDC’s National AIDS Clearinghouse. Watson had a “unique understanding of cultural and ethnic subtleties,” said Rafael Mazin of the Pan American Health Organization.

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