One Voice

Michael Callen's power and grace

April 1, 1994 By David Drake

"...and the only measure of your words and your deeds will be the love you leave behind when you're gone."

It is no surprise that these lyrics from Fred Small's lullaby, "Everything Possible," are sung both of The Flirtations' albums. It is their most requested song. If you've never heard it, stop reading this, get thee to a store where it is sold, buy it, play it, and let it take you to the promise of the title.

This will not be difficult for you to do. For you will hear a voice that will most beautifully, most truthfully, most gently and most assuredly take ahold of the rope that is hinged to your soul and led you through this prayer of a song - "no one sang to me" - to reveal the truth of your heart, which is where the measure of your love can be found.

This voice that will lead you belongs to Michael Callen. It always will. Now that he is gone, this voice belongs to you. It was given to you, if not during this song, then at many other times and in many other ways throughout your life.

If you don't believe you've ever heard the voice of Michael Callen, you are wrong. He gave you his voice when you may have just been sprouting ears. Shortly after his diagnosis with full-blown AIDS 12 years ago, Michael Callen's voice sounded through the early rash of chaos with take-charge personal responsibility and freedom - and unrelenting respect for the health and natural well-being of his gay brethren - to create the world's first safer sex manual, How to Have Sex in an Epidemic. Written, published and distributed with the help of his doctor and friend, Michael Callen's voice defined how to save your life or the life of another by continuing to live life.

Michael Callen's voice answered a public who seemed determined to morally categorize people infected with the viral complications we have come to call AIDS as either victims of innocence or guilt. By sounding the wake-up call Michael Callen drew together a group of his own to form the People With AIDS Coalition. With P-WAC, Michael Callen's voice not only began to dismantle moralistic categorization, but rearticulated the world's view of a victim of AIDS to that of a person with AIDS. The sound of a community of individuals under attack internally and externally defined the voice of self-empowerment through group-empowerment.

When put on the page, Michael Callen's voice gave you proof that an AIDS diagnosis was not a

death sentence. A testament to longtime living with this disease is to be found in his book, Surviving AIDS (Harper Collins/New York). The title itself is an answer to the lies that you have systematically been fed throughout the Plague Years. Although Surviving AIDS came directly from the very individual voice of Michael Callen, its resonant title defines the modern truth of our existence. We are all surviving AIDS.

And so you have heard Michael Callen's voice before. You may even be reading this today because of him. If you knew him, you are indeed fortunate. If you didn't, you are stil lucky because his voice can still be heard in the music. Listen to is recordings; and you will hear the measure of love in the words and deeds of Michael Callen's life. As composer, soloist or weaving throughout the miraculous a capella blend of the genuinely fabulous Flirtations, Michael Callen's voice is still singing. Michael Callen's voice is more than the sound of truth or empowerment or of live, even. It is the sound of everything. Of everything possible. And ultimately that is the power, beauty and legacy of one Michael Callen.

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