Presidential Nemesis

For Steve Michael, activism was stronger than death

September 1, 1998 By Bob Roehr

Some people are “born again” as evangelical Christians; Steve Michael was reborn as a tireless AIDS warrior. Testing positive in January 1992 “upped the ante, it changed the focus,” he said later. The West Coast wanderer who sold cars and managed a thrift shop had finally found his vocation. “It clicked in my mind: All the skills and talents I have, I can use to force politicians to do good things on AIDS.”

Inspired by the ACT UP Presidential Project launched by activist Michael Petrelis to inject AIDS into the 1992 campaign, Steve and his partner, Wayne Turner, zapped Democratic candidate Senator Tom Harkin at an event in their hometown of Seattle and first tasted media success. Quickly, the pair scrounged tickets and flew to join Petrelis in New Hampshire. “What about AIDS?” became the battle cry as they joined hundreds of ACT UPers who dogged candidate Bill Clinton nationwide, from the primaries through the convention to the November election. The result: No less than 16 specific AIDS policy promises.

Steve and Wayne followed Clinton to the capital in 1993, where they revived the local ACT UP chapter, which hosted many national demonstrations. The pair also created one of their many scrappy entrepreneurial projects: The AIDS Resources Center, a thriftshop/meeting place that provided a bit of cash for their food and activism. They lived in the cramped office above the used clothes and battered appliances, huddling around an electric space heater in winter.

From this squalid nerve center, they worked the media brilliantly. The New York Times, CNN, the Associated Press all came calling, enabling Steve and Wayne to drive home ACT UP’s litany about Clinton’s unmet AIDS promises—an AIDS cure project, needle-exchange funding, repeal of the HIV immigration ban, universal health care and more. Steve even formed a strange-bedfellows alliance with reporter Paul Bedard at the archconservative, anti-Clinton Washington Times, feeding him leads on AIDS stories. The paper not only picked them up, it also quoted Steve’s acerbic comments about administration policies.

Steve was unfailingly creative in publicizing AIDS issues. In 1996, he got his name on the Democratic presidential primary ballot in New Hampshire and ran TV ads promoting condom use and showing how to clean needles. When a TV station balked at airing the spots, he sought and won a precedent-setting FCC ruling that the station had violated his right to political speech. He

later formed the AIDS Cure Party, qualifying for the Tennessee ballot as a presidential candidate (with ACT UP/New York's Ann Northrop as VP).

Outraged by DC's grossly inadequate AIDS programs, Steve developed strong local political ties. In 1994, he endorsed ex-mayor Marion Barry's bid to return to power when few other AIDS advocates would. The strategy helped him get named to the city's HIV Planning Council, where, as chair of the fiscal oversight committee, he fought for accountability from AIDS service providers.

Steve and Wayne pushed for local needle-exchange programs and organized a petition drive to get a medical-marijuana initiative on the ballot. Ever the coalition-builders, they forged alliances with black nationalists, drug reformers, Greens and DC home-rule advocates.

Thanks to Steve's confrontational tactics—which often led to his arrest at demonstrations—the AIDS establishment could barely stomach him, and the feeling was mutual. At times, he wasted energy on personal slights. Yet the day inevitably came, again and again, when Steve would get a quiet call from a well-connected lobbyist suggesting a demo that he or she was unwilling or unable to organize.

Through it all, Steve took great pride and comfort in the love and activist commitment he shared with Wayne. He often joked that their relationship was more honest than the president's marriage.

Steve died May 25 of AIDS-related complications, after nearly a month in intensive care. He was 42. But one more act remained. On June 4, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue once again rang with Steve's passion about Clinton's broken AIDS promises, as 200 friends, activists and politicians gathered to display his body—and his message (see Pozarazzi, p. 56). It was the only place his funeral could have been held. "Steve's finest hour was when he was hounding and haunting the president," Ann Northrop told the gathering. "And I remain secure in the knowledge that he will haunt this president forever."

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