S.O.S.—May 1999

My friends who died have left me an inspired legacy.

May 1, 1999 By Sean Strub

When I moved to New York City from Iowa in 1978, I thought I had leapt the highest hurdle of my life—coming out of the closet. Once I accepted—even embraced—my sexuality, I imagined everything else would be easy. I was 19. I approached each day with enormous hope and anticipation as I explored the many neighborhoods, cultures and people of my new home.

What I experienced, where I traveled and whom I met reinforced my enthusiasm. I can vividly remember hearing of someone especially interesting or attractive or accomplished and thinking, Oh, I haven't met him (or her) *yet*. It seemed to me that everyone lived in or came to New York City; I raced all over town, bouncing among different social and professional spheres, anxious to know them all. Part social climbing, for sure, but mostly a sense of exuberant urgency to fulfill my dreams in the greatest city on earth.

No matter how many years pass, this history is never far from me. I had thought coming out of the closet was the greatest challenge of my life. I was wrong. I had thought I was making friendships with people whose company I would enjoy for decades—drifting into old age with a familiar group of long-time pals. I was wrong again.

Today, I remain haunted by the painting, dance and music we will never experience, the literature we will never read, the political and spiritual leadership we will never know. I mourn the pain of every child, lonely, confused and frightened, who has lost one or both parents to AIDS, every homeless, mentally ill or addicted person trying to hold the tiny scraps of his or her life together while at the same time combating HIV. I mourn the thousands of young men and women—now mostly African American—who acquire the virus sexually, from men, because of an AIDS bureaucracy and funding paradigm that won't protect them.

A selfish part of my decision to publish *POZ* was that I wished to record the history—my history—that was quickly disappearing with each new death. I never want my own life and the lives of my friends and contemporaries to become invisible. And as the future unfolds, new stories get told, and more history is at risk of vanishing. But now this history is most often among the poor and the silent.

In David Drake's one-person play, *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*, the audience weeps for the

anonymous men and women who have died: “You who were never famous, never counted, never quoted, never seen. Nobody.” But, David continues, they were all “somebody” because each was loved.

We can never know if someone who died of AIDS might have, as the cliché goes, “cured cancer or achieved world peace,” but it doesn’t matter. What we do know is that all of us have certainly lost someone who could have brightened our day today. Someone who could be holding our hand right now, or comforting or cuddling us tonight. Right now, millions of people all over the globe would give anything to be reunited—even for a moment—with someone they have loved and lost .

We have been profoundly impoverished, collectively and individually, by two decades of horrendous deaths. But we only further impoverish ourselves if we fail to keep the memories and dreams alive. That is why memorials, like the Names Project Quilt and the AIDS Memorial Grove, are almost primal. They remind us, sustain us and allow us to show respect for what we have lost.

My friends who have died—not all of AIDS—have left me an inspired legacy of hope, ambition, faith and love. I think of them often, painfully fantasizing about what they would be doing today, what they would have to say, how we might be enjoying one another’s company and lives.

I don’t cry easily, but the final scene in Craig Lucas’ *Longtime Companion*, in which each and every one of the dead are brought back to life at a celebration on the beach, always brings tears to my eyes. If there is a heaven, that’s what I want it to be. Here are the names of some of those closest whom I hope to find there:

ALAN BARON, ROBERTO BARRIOS, KEITH BARROW, RICHARD BEECH, STUART BERGER, MICHAEL CALLEN, STEVE CATES, TROY DAVIS, KEN DAWSON, BRUCE DECKER, TIM DLUGOS, RAY ENGEBRETSON, LARRY FAIN, DAVID FEINBERG, TOM FLYNN, JOE FOULON, PAUL FRIEDMAN, BILL GARBE, ROBERT GARCIA, FRED GARNETT, GRIFF GOLD, TERRY GREEN, JACK GREENHUT, RICHARD GUZIKOWSKI, KEN HALPERIN, ROBERT HAYES, TITO HERNANDEZ, ROB HERSHMAN, MICHAEL HIRSCH, JAY JOHNSON, ANDRE LEDOUX, STEVEN LEECH, HELEN L’HEUREUX, SAL LICATA, TIM LOWE, WALTER MARLOWE, KIKI MASON, PATRICK MCALLISTER, JOE MCDONALD, ALDYN MCKEAN, STEVE MICHAEL, MICHAEL MISOVE, JIM NALL, NATHANIEL PIER, BOB RAFSKY, PAUL RAPOPORT, RICHARD ROUILARD, VITO RUSSO, JIMMY SAVAGE, JEFF SCHAIRE, RUPERT SMITH, STEVE SNYDER, STEVE SPIER, DAVID STECKLING, TOM STODDARD, DAVID SUMMERS, SWEN SWENSON, BRUCE VOELLER, PETER VOGEL, JASON WORTH.

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