Saint Sorge

Harm reduction and heroin were his life

May 1, 1999 By Lei Chou

Rod Sorge, beloved friend, comrade and guiding star, died of AIDS January 27. He was 30 years old. As I go through his personal belongings and his activist archive, so many memories come alive. Rod and I first met in 1989. As young gay men, we had come to New York City in pursuit of an existence that we weren't allowed elsewhere. What we found was a gay community devastated by AIDS. We were bewildered by all the dead—the brothers and sisters whose lives and struggles we would never share. There was work to do. By taking on responsibilities in ACT UP, we felt the power that comes to people in coalition, and unleashed it.

Rod cofounded ACT UP's needle-exchange committee in 1990, spending every weekend rain or shine for two years giving clean needles to drug users, who were dying in droves. I can still see the smile on his face at the ACT UP meeting when the committee announced its hard-won acquittal, on a necessity defense, for the possession of needles—a victory that paved the way for the nation's legal exchanges. That night he got a long and loud standing ovation.

Throughout the '90s, as activism became passé, Rod advocated tirelessly for the rights and health of drug users. He routinely risked arrest by handing out clean needles in defiance of the government's inhumane "war on drugs." He designed, and raised funds for, grassroots programs that treated addicts with respect and helped them to take control of their lives. He conducted trainings around the world in the fine art of running an effective needle exchange. He testified at governmental hearings, calling for the decriminalization of needle possession and demanding equal access to combination therapy for addicts. He attended scientific conferences to collect the mountain of evidence he used to change policies. And always he was busy writing to, for and about drug users—newsletters, brochures, a safety manual called "Getting Off Right" and, in the December 1997 *POZ*, "Peace of My Heart," about his plans for an "empowered, purposeful" suicide by heroin to avert a degrading AIDS death.

In the philosophy of harm reduction Rod found a way to empower himself and the people he served. In the summer of 1996, he learned he had HIV (and 15 CD4 cells) after being hospitalized with life-threatening PCP. Soon, he also came down with a terrible case of shingles on his face and forehead. I can still hear the way he screamed in pain that night. Rod had turned to heroin a year before to alleviate his lifelong depression and loneliness. Now heroin also became his pain management. Characteristically, Rod began writing about how, as an addict with AIDS desperate

to access decent health care, he was frustrated at every turn. The following excerpt is from “One Junky’s Odyssey,” first published in the Harm Reduction Coalition’s newsletter, *Communication*.

“Every provider I saw assumed that the most serious issue I was facing was my opiate dependency, despite the fact that this was not something I defined as problematic. (Of course, for harboring this attitude I was accused of being in ‘denial.’) Among the things I considered more serious problems were: the TB meningitis infection I had and the seizures it constantly caused; the fact that I had only 15 CD4 cells and a three and a half million viral load, a condition that kept my body on the verge of collapse; the herpes zoster infection on my face and head, treatment for which entailed going to my doctor *every day* to receive an intravenous infusion of a toxic drug; the fact that I was experiencing crazy drug interactions from being on 14 different pharmaceuticals; the deep depression I was feeling as a result of trying to deal with such huge life changes by myself; and the challenge of trying to earn a living, pay the rent and perform my job successfully in the midst of this other shit. All of these issues would apparently resolve themselves if only I stopped shooting dope…. Every time I encounter a health professional, a social worker or even a friend who counsels me to stop using, I struggle with what they have to say, yet I always ask, ‘Why? Why is it so crucial for me, someone with a life-threatening illness who finds in heroin a terrific comfort, to stop?’ I perform a challenging job, pay the rent (sometimes late) and, most important, am willing to suffer the inconveniences and risks involved in using illicit drugs. That is a choice I’m willing to live with, and I’m so alone in believing that it is consistent with a happy and successful life. That is the hardest part about being a user: not internalizing the belief that I am a piece of shit and trying to live a life of satisfaction and dignity that everyone tells me is impossible.”

At his death, Rod left a manuscript on his desk, applying the philosophy of harm reduction to every aspect of a drug addict’s struggle to survive. We will never see it finished.

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