Thorne on Our Side

The last DNP editor remembers his peerless leader

August 1, 1999 By Tom Ace

Beowulf Thorne, cofounder of *Diseased Pariah News* magazine, died of AIDS May 8. He was 34 and lived in Palo Alto, California. Wulf's brand of pointed black humor left its mark on thousands of *DPN* readers worldwide, and even more so on those of us who knew him as a friend.

I got my first Wulf bite when I answered one of his inimitable personal ads, circa 1991. These announced his HIV status up front, describing the virus-spewing nature of his weenie with headlines like "I've Got the Danger Penis" and "This Gun Shoots Death." The latter phrase had elicited a call from the personal ad department at The *San Francisco Bay Times*, pleading with Wulf to say something less provocative. Wulf stood his ground.

The chap at the Bay Times evidently underestimated the public's capacity to appreciate such dark humor; that ad was tame compared to much of what Wulf wrote for *DPN* (and *POZ*). Over the course of nine years and 11 issues (yes, No. 11 is imminent), Wulf treated readers to the trademark wit that seemed to flow effortlessly from his imagination. Luring subscribers with the line "Like syphilis, *DPN* is the gift that keeps on giving," Wulf gave us AIDS Barbie and KS Ken, cover lines like "Roy Cohn and Kimberly Bergalis…Together for Eternity" and many other gems.

Wulf's strategy for dealing with AIDS was the polar opposite of denial. He wanted to look HIV in the eye, to understand it in its full morbid glory. To that end, a few years ago he bought a picture book called *Color Atlas of AIDS*. Intended for health professionals, this wasn't a volume you'd want to leave on your coffee table. It was a compendium of photographs—many exceedingly gruesome—depicting the consequences of various opportunistic infections. I wasn't thrilled, but Wulf was intrigued—and not just because he'd always been fascinated with biology. No, he bought the book to immerse himself, to apprehend the ravages of AIDS as deeply as he could. The severity of his approach may not be to everyone's taste, but it worked for him. Wulf retained his composure and humor through a long and difficult sickness.

As *DPN* readers well know, Wulf was thoroughly uninhibited about speaking his mind. Freed from concerns about pissing off advertisers (or anyone else), *DPN* was as open a forum as he could muster. It was Wulf's vision that the magazine should run nude centerfolds (complete with models' T-cell counts) and other frankly erotic material; he'd had disagreements early on about this with cofounder Tom Shearer, who insisted that *DPN* shouldn't be a "one-handed magazine." But Tom

died before the third issue, leaving Wulf free to make *DPN* as lusty as he cared to. That also made it harder to find willing printers, and *DPN*'s provocative covers (like a naked Jesse Helms holding a bunch of cigarettes in a special way) occasionally kept it out of bookstores. But for Wulf, it was a full-strength *DPN* or none at all.

Wulf had formally studied biology and graphic arts, but he had a very broad range of interests. He delighted in sprinkling obscure references about any topic at all in *DPN*. His last job before going on disability was in textbook design at Addison-Wesley, and he continually irritated the authors by pointing out errors in their text. Hired as a graphic artist, he couldn't resist proofreading the text as well. Wulf was also an enthusiastic advocate of safer-sex practices, not only in his *DPN* Captain Condom cartoons but also in the Condom Co-Op collective he founded while at the University of California at Santa Cruz in the '80s and in the safe-sex materials he helped design for Oakland's Condom Resource Center.

Toward the end of his life, Wulf's main passions were *DPN* and plants; he'd landscaped his yard with an eclectic variety of shrubs and trees, and raised cacti, orchids and other species in his backyard greenhouse. He cultivated both "nice" plants and offensive ones; he was especially fond of his stapelias, whose flowers smelled like rotting meat and were pollinated by flies.

What else is there to say? Wulf was an original. I miss him dearly.

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