# Tribute

Swen Swenson believed one person could make a difference

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Two nights after Swen Swenson's death in Los Angeles in 1993, close to 100 people -- including family members, friends and even one of the nurses who'd taken care of Swen during his last months in the hospital -- marched on Santa Monica Boulevard, carrying signs with his picture, stopping traffic and chanting. Despite police harassment, when the march reached the Bank of Los Angeles at Santa Monica and La Cienega the group piled their signs in the middle of the street and set the pile ablaze. Watching the flames rise higher and higher from the bonfire, they continued to cry the words they had shouted along the length of the march: "Swen is dead and no one cares!"

Their actions, of course, belied their chant.

Swen was a man of many talents. He is best known for his work on television -- where he was a featured dancer on *Sid Ceasar's Show of Shows* for years -- in films and on Broadway, especially his Tony-nominated performance in *Little Me*. Few, however, may be aware of his passion for collecting art. He had unique and eclectic tastes: In his lifetime he amassed one of the world's largest collections of carousel figures. Swen also had a great love for animals and bred and raised Yorkies for over 40 years. But mostly he loved people, all kinds of people, usually the more eccentric the better.

I've always considered Swen Swenson to be one of the original activists. From the time that he gave me my first job in the theater in the summer of 1969 when, in between leafleting all of the buses to Fire Island for the gay Off-Broadway play he was producing, he also had me writing my congressman about the numerous causes to which he was dedicated at the time. We first met a few weeks after the Stonewall uprising, but it was not until his memorial service that I learned that Swen had turned his Greenwich Village house into a headquarters for raising bond money for those who'd been arrested during the riots.

Swen was a quiet but generous supporter of many organizations involved in the lesbian and gay community, and of the fight against AIDS. In contrast to his quiet philanthropy, he was a loud and relentless advocate for these causes to his friends, colleagues and acquaintances. One of Swen's most meaningful friendships was with the artist Keith Haring. It was Swen who brought Keith to his first ACT UP/New York meeting.

When Swen moved to LA in 1989, he channeled much of his energy into that city's fledgling ACT

UP chapter. Swen had very little tolerance for complacency of any kind because he believed that no matter how daunting the circumstances, one person could still make a difference. On weekends, he and his canine soulmate, Fever, could often be seen set up for hours in front of the Bank of Los Angeles on Santa Monica Boulevard, where Swen would raise money for AIDS by offering to let people pet his beautiful “gay” dog for a dollar.

It would be hard to speculate on the breadth and depth of Swen’s influence upon countless lives. I know if he were alive today, Swen would still be staying up all night writing his letters. We have lost so many unsung heroes like Swen. The only way we can honor them is by continuing to fight on.

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