Tribute: Greg Smith

Pride and Prejudice 1962-2003

February 1, 2004 By Laura Whitehorn

One of America's few openly gay, openly positive prisoners, Gregory Dean Smith, died in the custody of the New Jersey Department of Corrections November 10 at age 40. An AIDS activist and educator behind bars, Greg had served 13 years of a 25-year sentence for allegedly spitting at and biting two prison guards in a 1989 Camden County Jail scuffle—a charge he sternly denied (see "Concealed Weapon," *POZ*, November 1998). At his death, Greg was suffering from AIDS, bacterial meningitis, sepsis and cirrhosis of the liver.

Having initially been sentenced to five years for burglary, Greg got 25 more for "attempted murder, aggravated assault and terroristic threats" related to the spitting incident. His preposterous charge became emblematic of AIDS-phobia and laws punishing PWAs under the guise of public health. A state appeals court refused to reverse the conviction. Activist and author Cindy Patton recalled thinking, "It's 1990—only crackpots still believe that HIV could be transmitted through saliva."

Asia Russell of ACT UP/Philadelphia, a friend of Greg's, said, "He never had self-pity. He always wanted to talk about the AIDS crisis instead of his own case."

HIVers and advocates alike consider Greg Smith a hero—particularly courageous among the many who turn their stigmatization into a fight for human rights. "Greg suffered an extraordinary injustice," says Sean Strub, founder of *POZ* "We will rue the day we did not go to the streets to stop the criminalization of having HIV."

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