The Last Song

In remembrance of Larry Kramer, who died in May at age 84, we dedicated our September magazine cover to him.

August 17, 2020 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

I first met Larry Kramer in 2008, shortly after I was hired as deputy editor of POZ. It was a brief introduction. We shook hands, and he gave me a big smile. I don't remember the event we attended, but I'll never forget the warmth he radiated.

I was surprised by his welcoming gesture. I may have never met him before, but I certainly knew he was a living legend. And I knew he yelled a lot. I suppose that I expected a gruff hello at best. I didn't realize that having Larry yell at me was a privilege I had not yet earned. But that would change.

Soon after I became editor-in-chief of POZ in 2012, I got an email from POZ founder Sean Strub, cc'ing Larry, that urged me to publish an opinion piece by Larry about his insurance company forcing him to order his medications by mail. I had just been forced to do the same, so I was all ears.

The op-ed was OK, but I needed to do some extensive editing. I sent the revised draft to Larry. He was pleased. I didn't learn until years later that one does not edit Larry. Perhaps it was for the best that I didn't know I wasn't supposed to do what I did.

We published his piece in December 2012. I followed up with a blog post about my situation in January 2013. There was a lot of interest from readers, so we assigned a feature story all about mail-order meds for the September 2013 issue of POZ.

Since we plan the content of print issues months in advance, it takes a while for a story to appear after we assign it. The seeming silence in between became a bit much for Larry. Suffice it to say that I got my first yell from Larry via email in June 2013. We resolved things amicably.

As a result of that exchange, however, I made sure that our feature story was not only excellent but well promoted. Nothing less would do. I share this anecdote as an everyday example of a basic truth about Larry—more often than not, his yelling was meant to make you rise to the occasion.

In remembrance of Larry, who died in May at age 84, we dedicated this issue's cover to him. The portrait is by George Towne, an artist living with HIV. He painted the image in 2016. We thank

George for use of the portrait, which was shown at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in 2017 as part of its annual ART & AIDS exhibition.

That year, the show commemorated the 35th anniversary of GMHC. Larry was a cofounder of that organization and of ACT UP, but he was also a novelist and a playwright. Indeed, he was many things to many people.

Click here to read Sean reminisce about Larry's passion and love for his community. We also remember Larry with more about his career as an author, and we spotlight social media tributes to him.

Remembering Larry in this edition of the magazine is especially fitting since the theme of this special issue is aging. Although the cause of his death was pneumonia, Larry overcame many health obstacles as he aged with HIV, including a liver transplant. Please read through the entire issue for more on aging.

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