Happy Birthday, My Almost Brother

March 6, 2014 By Shawn Decker

I’m not consistent on Facebook- I don’t check in every day, or see updates from people I’m close to. I don’t post my every brainfart or rehash the latest celebrity gossip. Often times in real life someone will say something, I’ll look clueless, and they’ll respond with: “Oh, I posted that on Facebook.” My catchphrase these days has become, "I miss *everything* on Facebook."

Part of that is a conscious decision. I don’t want to be glued to my iPhone. And I don’t feel guilty if I miss wishing someone a happy birthday, though I do get tickled when mine comes around and there’s a ton of well-wishes. I do get the appeal of social networking- it was what I built my decision to open up about HIV around... the vastness and immediacy of connecting with friends, and strangers, is a pretty damn cool thing. If the internet wasn’t around when I decided to talk about HIV in 1996, then things for me would have been a lot different.

Having a past that doesn't include the internet is a pretty damn cool thing, too. I'm glad I didn't have to worry about a cyber-presence in junior high school, or high school. I'm sure my peers back then would have been less forgiving about missing those birthdays.

Which brings me to an old pal whose birthday is today, something I noticed by chance yesterday while logged into Facebook. Ryan Almarode. I met Ryan a couple of years after my HIV diagnosis. I was 13, he was 12. According to his Facebook profile, he is celebrating his 73rd birthday today. In actuality, he's been gone for almost a year now, having taken his own life...

I have so many coming of age stories and vivid memories of my friendship with Ryan. We formed our first bands together- he played guitar and I played keyboards. Along with our friends, we were collectively known as The Demonic Doves. We never had a gig and seldom had a full band practice. I remember one Christmas morning, Ryan and I stumbled upon a gas station that was open after a moderate search. He bought me a hot cocoa and I bought him a cupcake or some kind of sugary sweet treat.

Overall, we were bored out of our minds. I reminisced about times we shared before. He said, "In a couple of years, we're going to look back at right now as the good ol' days." The comment immediately resonated, and that hot cocoa tasted all the sweeter as we plunked quarters into the Mat Mania arcade game.

After I'd disappeared for a few months, in the throes of my first love which ended in devastating fashion, I found myself at home alone. Bored and depressed. A knock at the door summoned me from my bedroom. "Hey man, I'm sorry you got dumped," Ryan said in an awkward greeting. Then his eyes met mine, and his face lit up with a huge smile. "But I'm so happy for me! I thought my summer was going to suck!" He dragged me out of the house for a Slurpee, and the party was on until we got busted for being drunk teenagers in public a month later.

After some problems at home, Ryan moved in with me and my family for a few months. My parents were about to sign papers making them his legal guardians, but his family decided against it at the last minute. Not too long after, Ryan started to party again but I was too scared of getting in trouble again... I mean, my dad was an ABC (Alcoholic Beverage Control) agent.

I made new friends, Ryan was hanging out with old friends. Though we drifted apart, we always took advantage if the fates reunited us. I can't remember ever being around the guy and not sharing a soul laugh- even if it was often at someone else's expense. For me, Ryan was always that voice in my head, the hilarious thing I wouldn't dare to say. That voice had a mouthpiece in Ryan Almarode. And he had the charisma to pull it off and not piss people off for *too* long.

One time in high school, my history teacher was absent. Since we had a substitute, Ryan figured he'd sit in class with me and goof off, knowing the substitute wouldn't pick up on the extra student. (He was always right about that kind of shit.) Our assignment was to write about a prominent figure of the Civil War. I told him our teacher really loved this general of the South. Ryan smiled and choose that guy as the subject of his essay.

When he handed me his work at the end of class before we turned in our papers, I couldn't believe what I read. It went something like this, "How could he think his untrained army of backwoods rednecks could compete with the well-trained units of the North?" A full two-pages just tearing down the teacher's hero in brilliant fashion. Literally, to this day, one of the funniest things I've ever read. Despite my concerns, Ryan passed the paper in, never to be seen in that classroom again. I still smile at the thought of how the teacher must have reacted to Ryan's well-constructed and cutting words.

During my teenage years, I just wanted to ignore HIV. I wanted to be as normal as possible. Mark Roys, TJ Overton and Ryan Almarode helped to make that happen. Much in the same way Jared Lambert and Michael Robertshaw helped me have a normal childhood with hemophilia.

But with HIV, the stakes were so much higher. And in my friendship with Ryan and our shared sense of humor, he showed me that normal is overrated. And reminded me often that I wasn't normal: a fact that had nothing to do with my HIV status.

I'll never forget you, Ryan. Happy birthday, old buddy. You don't look a day over 40.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/goodbye-almost-broth