My Battle is Won. Life Goes On.

June 26, 2015 By Jay Squires

I waited for Friday for more than twenty-five years. I became a foot soldier in the fight for gay rights in the 1990s when I volunteered to produce end-of-life documents for Richmonders dying from AIDS. I served as a leader for our “gay chamber of commerce” when we asserted our right to participate fully in our city’s business and cultural affairs. I grew into a political leader and led the organization advocating for equality across the Commonwealth of Virginia. I was chairman of the campaign that fought valiantly to defeat the mean-spirited constitutional amendment that made us permanent second-class citizens. I founded and built a region-wide community center for my people, offering them opportunities to live their lives proudly and so very visibly. This was my life and I thought it always would be until things changed.

We all know what changed. This long-time gay and HIV activist was diagnosed with AIDS.

Three years ago I began a new life, with new priorities: Safety, Security and Peace. These three goals became all of my life as I struggled to come to terms with changes forced upon me. I changed. My God how I changed.

I developed new priorities that replaced a lifetime’s concerns. I studied like I hadn’t since law school. I knew it was critical that I understand the virus and how it was altering my life. I found many resources, most trustworthy and offering measured opinions based on supportable evidence. POZ became my favorite among these. POZ offered easily digested medical facts, but not these facts alone. It was important for me that the website and magazine did not dwell on sickness or death but instead spoke of life. I fought for life and I worked every day to make my new one a good one.

Other “resources” were dangerous. They were filled with speculation and invective. They were written by people who had filled their new lives with criticism and complaint. This was no surprise for me. The gay community at large is much the same. I lived successfully within it for years by recognizing the motives of those who did nothing but carp and complain. My advice to you is to be careful to do the same. It is too easy to be distracted and demoralized by those who want to spread their pain but not love. Living with AIDS makes it easy to wallow in self-pity and hard sometimes to find hope amid pain and failure. Don’t do it. Life is literally too short.

I discovered I had no time for the fight that once consumed me and I was surprised I had no regrets. I had given my time, I had done good work. Others would lead now but when victory came, as I knew it would, I would not lead the cheers.

The news came over coffee this morning. Our highest court settled the issue and I was equal, just as I sought for decades. I was happy but not ecstatic. The news barely distracted me.

On my second cup I understood. I replaced my old activism for the group and for place within the world with simpler and much more important work. Today I am concerned with making my life good and happy. The politics and jockeying and the shading of truth to sway the undecided and to meet the actions of my opponents are no longer the reason I rise. Today I rise to live.

I also can testify that the right to marry, so important in the abstract, has consequences. My husband Angelo and I were married, for better or for worse, in New York City in 2013. Now he may lose his health insurance coverage because the proceeds of my disability award are considered his asset. This is where I will fight in the future. My battle will be for my touchstones, for my family's safety, security and peace.

My life has moved on and in doing so has changed my priorities. Today they are not historic. They are everyday, of the same sort faced by everyone, particularly people with a challenge such as ours. I am pleased by this change. It feels so real.

I did not attend the celebration Friday but I did toast my friends from a distance. Many of them will continue to work to improve our status globally. I will fight to maintain it personally. Both fights have value; both are worthy. I have changed so much but I am the same. I have not forgotten, I have learned. Now my strength is for me and those I love. For its use I receive love in return. The world is so different and it is better. Today was a day to celebrate.

Postscript-

Over Saturday's coffee I viewed my Facebook comments and saw that I had been tagged in one along with five veterans of our 2006 fight against Virginia's anti-marriage constitutional amendment. Deb, my old friend, congratulated each of us for sticking with it. She said we had never lost hope although I knew that sometimes hope seemed a fool's errand. I posted the reply below and you will see I have not completely abandoned my old work. I am pleased I haven't. It forms the basis for my new work. I recognize our accomplishments and now am off about the search for new hills to climb and new battles to win for me, my family and my loved ones.

My comments apply equally to a grand fight for equality and a small fight for quality in a life tainted by HIV/AIDS. In this fight we will win and we will be honored by the victory.

Indeed Deb. Thank you for your work and most for keeping the faith. We all did this and we all know this was hard. We never despaired. We prayed for the end to come and unexpectedly it did, sooner than we hoped. In victory we will be forgiving because we who have faced intransigence can do nothing else. We have led and won by our example and this will be our legacy. We have so much work to do and we will succeed again because we and our people will not rest until we are granted all and not only one. We will not rest until our equality is recognized by all, many more than five wise jurists. We will not rest until all the fight is behind us and we can lead our lives, in success and failure, subject to the same rules as our neighbors. We will not rest until we are more than simply privileged. We will not rest until we are free.

Days like Friday and today bring great changes to the world but also to a single man. The small changes in one life are as important as the large affecting a society. The rules for the small fight are the same as for the large. Each of us, when we change, bring all of us closer to the better world all seek. Keep changing. Keep fighting. Never give up. It will get better. Count on it.

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