Rest in Peace, Michael

March 30, 2009 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Michael died 15 years ago today. He's a man that I once loved. He's also how I became HIV positive (and please take note that I deliberately used "how" instead of "why").

In "Coming Out Again" from the October 2008 issue of *POZ*, I wrote the following about Michael:

I met Michael in 1990 after a summer away from home at a Marine Corps training school. I had gone through basic training the summer before. I was in the best shape of my life.

Michael was handsome, but what appealed to me was that he was an average guy. He adored me. He was a devout Roman Catholic and a successful businessman. I fell in love with him. He told me he was HIV negative, but he lied. He didn't admit to me that he was HIV positive until 1993.

When I tested negative in 1991, I believed that I'd been

absolved for the risky behavior I'd had in the past. I had just returned from active military duty physically unharmed, but mentally wounded. Because I felt both invincible and vulnerable, I let down my guard with Michael.

When I tested positive in 1992, Michael and I were no longer together ... Michael died in 1994 of AIDS-related complications, adding profound grief to my list of woes. His death only increased my fear that I would soon get sick and die.

I think of Michael all the time. I forgave him long ago for lying to me about his HIV status. I was at least as responsible as he was for what happened. I now understand intimately his fear of rejection. It's happened to me too many times.

I'd like to share a few more memories of Michael that I didn't include in that article.

When the first bombs dropped in Kuwait in 1991, I was with Michael in his house in suburban New Jersey. We listened on the radio to what we knew would mean my being called to active duty and possibly death. Dutifully, he drove me home across two rivers to Queens. We didn't say much during the ride, but I felt comforted by his mere presence.

Michael wrote me constantly while I was in Southern California on active duty training for the Gulf War. He surprised me with a visit for a long weekend. We drove through the mountains and border towns of Baja California. It remains one of the most romantic trips I've ever had.

The last time I saw Michael was in a hospital cleanroom. He had an oxygen mask on and was surrounded by family members in gloves, robes and hairnets. Most of them I had never met. They were kind enough to leave us alone for a while. We didn't say much, but I knew that he felt as comforted as I had that night he drove me to Queens.

I was angry at Michael for a long time and I was sad for even longer, but not once did I ever allow hate into my heart. Forgiveness wasn't immediate, but it was inevitable. It was the only way that I could move on. We are all imperfect. Rest in peace, Michael.

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