Ryan White: Remembering Him Three Decades Later

Ryan White won over even the most homophobic of conservatives in the 1980s while advocating for equality for the treatment of all with HIV.

April 8, 2020 By Shawn Decker

It's been three decades since Ryan White passed. As someone who was born with hemophilia, diagnosed with HIV and kicked out of public school as a result I can relate to some of what his journey presented. I've written about Ryan many times, because the older I get the more respect I have for what he did, and it's continued impact on the world. Though I never had the opportunity to meet him (he was famous and I was deeply in my AIDS closet when he was still alive) I have been able to meet his mother, Jeanne, on a few occasions. She picked up his educational torch after he passed in 1990.

By doing so, she changed the course of my life.

More on that later...

I want to share a few things I've written about Ryan for POZ over the years. This Positoid Column, "Do The White Thing", appeared in the January, 1998 issue of the magazine. In it I explain why I avoided Ryan during my teenage years, and discuss the first time I met Jeanne and how my mom and I took her out for ice cream at Ruby Tuesday. The Importance of Remembering Ryan White appeared in the September, 2010 issue of POZ. About a year ago I blogged about the Stranger Things Season 2 connection to Ryan White on Long-term Survivors Day, as I saw it.

Regarding the first thing I wrote about Ryan in 1997... about a year later I got to see Jeanne speak again at JMU. A friend called to let me know- I had a Board meeting for the local AIDS Services Group that evening so I did what any responsible 23 year old would do: I ditched the meeting to go see Jeanne. After the talk I didn't invite her to ice cream, but I did wait in line to just thank her for sharing her time and Ryan's message. Gwenn, who was attending JMU as a graduate student, happened to be standing behind me. We'd spoken on the phone once through the AIDS Services Group; she was looking for someone to educate in high schools about life with HIV. What I didn't know, is that she'd disqualified me for her purposes because I'd contracted HIV through blood products as a child. (She was looking for someone who'd contracted HIV through sex.)

Gwenn overheard me yammering with friends and, after I spoke with Jeanne, a pretty brunette

asked: “Are you Shawn Decker?”

I really believe Ryan White set us up. Gwenn thought she’d disqualified me, but Ryan flipped through his calendar, saw that his mom was heading to JMU and he said: “We’ll see about that, toots.” Of course, Ryan was flabbergasted that I had no clue his mom was educating in the area, so he nudged my friends to invite me, then worked his magic to get us beside each other in line. “I know she’ll hear that loudmouth,” he must have thought.

Gwenn and I not only fell in love, but we also started educating together. Soon we were giving educational talks at colleges all over the country. Ryan wasn’t just looking out for my little fellow by introducing us, he was also giving his mom a hand in carrying that educational torch. Several years after our first “random” face-to-face meeting, Gwenn and I had a chance to hang out with Jeanne. It was just such a laid-back conversation, full of laughter and a little dishing. Just an awesome experience.

Do I believe in magic? Yes. Do I believe Ryan possessed magic in life? Absolutely. To be able to deliver a much-needed message in a calm voice, all the while dealing with such a scary thing as staring down AIDS with no viable treatment options… he’s really the best of what we can hope for out of mortals. And even though I never met him in person, I’ve felt his presence, I’ve felt his love. The older I get, the more I feel like I know and understand who he was. Though I’m saddened that he wasn’t able to have more years, I’m thankful that he made the most of them and his influence continues to guide me.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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