

Emergency Room Games

by Randy Wicker

5:00 a.m.

As I write this, David Combs, my life-mate, lays strapped to an IV on a portable stretcher a few feet away in N.Y.U. Medical Center's Emergency Room's corridor for the fifth consecutive night.

We got "primo" space our first night here—an alcove at one end of the crowded hallway "privatized" by a flimsy three-panel screen.

David arrived severely dehydrated. Moments after being processed, placed on a stretcher and attached to an I.V., his pulse dropped to 70. over zero.

"He's very weak," the supervising nurse announced solemnly, "his chances of surviving the night are slim."

"This is the best spot in the hall," she explained, jostling several stretchers around, maneuvering us in and placing the screen. "It's more private here."

"Why is he sweating so?" I asked.

"He's probably going into shock. The sweating is a sign his body's systems are beginning to shut down."

Fifty days warehoused in Hoboken's St. Mary's Hospital dealing with PCP and a partially collapsed lung, followed by five days of uncontrolled diarrhea at home had brought us to our last gateway of hope—N.Y.U. Medical Center—which, according to those we thought should know, was simply "without equal."

Despite a million dollars worth of private medical insurance, and even a couple of contacts with well-placed, big-

name docs, we found the inn was full.

Yuppie Truth. Thousands of dollars spent on insurance the last three years and here we were sharing a florescent-lit hallway with two drug users rapping about jail experiences; a chubby middle-aged executive with a walrus moustache screaming in pain from

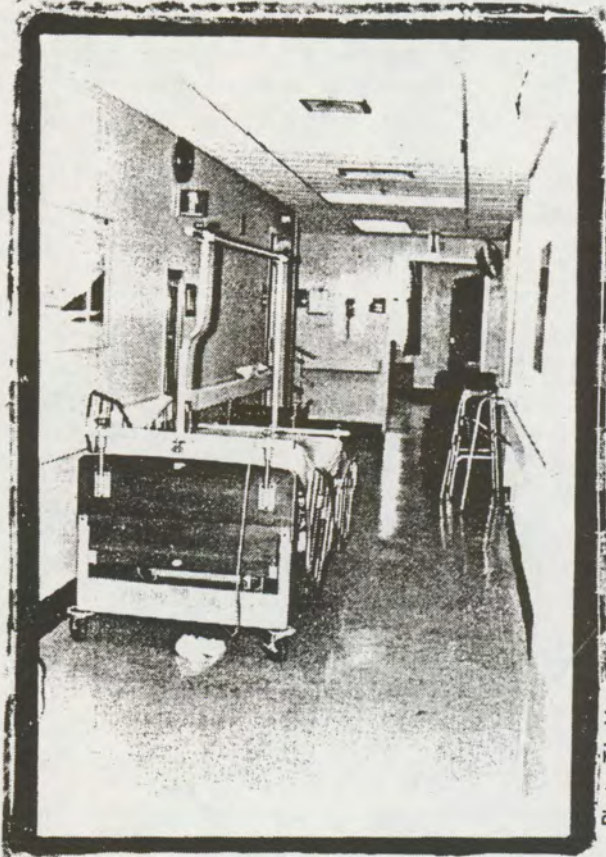


Photo: T.L. Litt

a back injury; a pale, groaning, elderly woman attached to a bubbling, beeping cardiac monitor; a handsome suave young clone tended by his lover; a hispanic PWA fouling his new wraps and bedding almost as quickly as the harried nurses' aides changed them; and a half dozen others.

Reality sandwich—too many people, not enough room. Upper class, middle class, lower class; drug heads, fag heads, executives—all human flotsam and jetsam floating around the

hospital hallway, all waiting for those already-filled rooms. Neither money, nor insurance, nor need could get a room that wasn't.

Politics of life and death. Social worker games—"We can get you a room at another hospital—St. Clares, Beth Israel, Bellevue, Doctor's Hospital." A few faces disappear.

Politics of life and death. Nurses' games—"We can arrange nursing care at home. Take him home. You can do almost as much for him at home as we can do here." More faces disappear.

A rotund woman in her late sixties sits in a chair. Sleeps upright all through the night. Nerve damage up and down her left side. Ten days sitting and sleeping in the chair waiting for a bed upstairs.

"Those rich folks upstairs have beds," she pains, "rich folks with insurance." I say nothing but silently cheer when she gets a bed the following day.

"Every AIDS patient must have their own private room. Hospital policy!" the medics explain. "No telling when you'll finally get in—days and days, weeks."

"Of course you can leave any time, A.M.A.—Against-Medical-Advice. We can arrange an ambulance home and nursing care. Your insurance will pay for it."

"Oh no, you can't go into Co-op care here. You're *too sick* for that. No I.V.'s allowed in Co-op care."

"Well enough to go home," I puzzled. "But not well enough to go into Co-op care?"

"Oh no! Sir. I didn't say *that*."

"You must sign out A.M.A.—Against Medical Advice," the social

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worker, the nurse, the attending physician, all explain.

And when pressed, they add, "A.M.A. means you really shouldn't go home."

"I'm going nuts! I can't stand this place anymore! Get me out of this damn corridor!" Those words echo day after day, bouncing stretcher to stretcher down the hall. A few more faces disappear.

"He really wants to be at home," an overseeing physician counsels when he phones me in Jersey. I'd been relieved after 36 hours by a friend. "And a patient's wishes, they're very important to me."

"I've been talking to David about going home. He very much wants to be at home with you," the social worker confides when she calls a few minutes later. "What are the chances of that happening?"

"David's not coming home to shit himself to death without medical attention on my couch," I respond firmly. "You're better equipped to deal with his medical problems than I am."

I'd actually been wavering.

"Oh take him home," friends good-heartedly counseled.

"Please! Please! Please!" David himself begged.

It was hard to say "no." David would have to come to my apartment where I and others could care for him.

I held Power of Attorney. David told them to have me sign the "Do-Not-Resuscitate" order that first evening.

Care partner games. Patient games. Life and death games. Why so many calls from the hospital as soon as I came home?

Realization earthquake. A giant crack had opened in the middle of the road—a sharp, clear dividing line.

There I was on one side, at home—and on the other side were the medical folks doing what they had been trained to do, albeit almost unwillingly—caring for David.

The social worker games, the nurse games, the doctor games had failed. We'd wait to get that room. Our faces were not going to disappear. ▼

FOOTNOTE: Thirty-six hours after this article was hand printed on a notepad, David Combs got a private room upstairs.

There he got unbelievably excellent medical treatment which knocked out his opportunistic infections, cured his diarrhea, rehydrated his body & with the help of transfusions kept his blood counts at reasonable levels.

However, no matter how much medicine can delay the progression of Aids, it cannot restore health to a body in such an advanced stage of the disease.

After nine days, David and I decided to return home. "A.M.A." - against medical advice - with the assistance of medications prescribed by his admitting doctor- to spend what precious time we had left at home. We do not expect to ever see the inside of a hospital again.

We had moved the mountain. We had gotten the very best of care from an incredible team of doctors. And we had discovered the limitations of today's medicine.

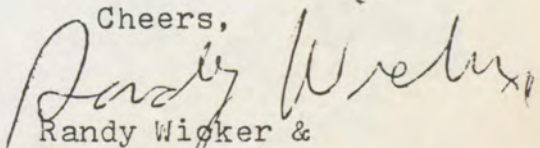
Theoretically, David could be kept alive on IVs almost forever. But being stuck by needles almost hourly and a wide array of other procedures necessary for intensive 24-hour-a-day medical care slowly became a marathon of medical torture.


The story of that slow-dawning discovery, "Above and Beyond the Emergency Room", is the subject of my next article.

The final story, "Above and Beyond Hospitals" is still unfolding day by day in my livingroom. So far, we have had six, wonderful, relatively trouble free days.

The good doctor has somehow been able to continue working his magic. But we know we are on a rapidly accelerating surfboard riding a huge breaking wave into shore. And we're going to stay upright and go as far as we possibly can.

Cheers,


Randy Wicker &
David Combs


Hoboken, NJ 07030

p.s. This article was written to alert others to the critical shortage of hospital beds. It may be reprinted by anyone without permission.



THE BLESSING OF THE UNION OF
DAVID COMBS AND RANDY WICKER

January 28, 1990
Hoboken, New Jersey



Give them strength to stand firm in their commitment against the disapproval and discouragement of a society so marred by sin that it would deny their love. Amen.

Randy

In the Name of God, David, I take you to be my partner in life; in sickness and health, in prosperity and adversity, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow...

David

Randy, I give you this poem as a symbol of my love. With my body I worship you, and with all that I am and all that I have, I honor you...

David and Randy join hands, and the Celebrant binds their hands together with the stole...

Celebrant

Bless, O Lord, this poem, a work of human creativity, to be a sign of the covenant by which these men have bound themselves to each other; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Christmas 1986

To Randy,

Our souls are two broad boards,
oiled & stained, set up to form
a table.

The jointure, planed,
is well-defined.

The tincture of the grain
glistens with wax & turpentine.
Euphonious morning light.

The solid grains
make scintillations
doubly bright. At dusk,
again affirming weight,
they celebrate their solid state.
The soul doth shine & glisten.

It dances:

It loves its substance,
It loves its tatters,
It loves its woes,
It loves its laughter.

You have taught me, defined
to me-'Love'

I love you,

David

Give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others; with a passion for justice and a particular concern for the marginalized and oppressed. Amen.,,

Grant that all who have witnessed this covenant may find their own relationships strengthened and their loyalties confirmed. Amen.,,

Celebrant

David and Randy have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, by the joining of hands, and by the giving and receiving of gifts. We celebrate their covenant before God and with each other, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder.

People

Amen.



FOR THE WEDDING, GEORGE PUT HIS SPECIAL TOUCH OF DECORATIVE MAGIC EVERYWHERE !



"MY WEDDING PRESENT TO YOU & DAVID," GEORGE DECLARED, "WILL BE A BEAUTIFUL APARTMENT FOR YOUR WEDDING DAY!"



I COULD ONLY WAIT & WORRY TILL REV. WILLIAMS GOT THERE.

EVEN KOOEE LOOKED WORRIED



AND HOW BEAUTIFUL INDEED!



MICHAEL HULBERT CAUGHT THE SPIRIT & GAVE GEORGE A HAND



"YOU & MARGE LOOK LIKE A MARRIED COUPLE IN THAT PHOTO!" WILLIE EXCLAIMED. ALL I CAN SAY IS THAT NO MAN LOOKING FOR A WOMAN COULD EVER DO BETTER.



"NOW, YOU JUST GET OUT OF HERE. I'M RUNNING THIS KITCHEN!" GEORGE HEARD MARGE TO ANDREW SAY.



"THAT'S FINE WITH ME," ANDREW AGREED. "I USED TO BE A WAITER. I KNOW HOW TO GIVE GOOD SERVICE."



"OH MY," GEORGE RECALLS THINKING AS MORE AND MORE GUESTS ARRIVED. "IF ANOTHER BOUQUET COMES THROUGH THAT DOOR, I'LL LOSE MY MIND!"



IT WAS DELIGHTFUL THAT BROTHER BOB, WHO HELPED RECRUIT MARGE AS A VOLUNTEER WITH THE CATHOLIC F.A.I.T.H. AIDS SERVICES CAME. HIS PRESENCE GAVE EVERYTHING AN ECUMENICAL AIRE.



"HERE GEORGE," MARSHA SAID CHEERFULLY. "HAVE SOME MORE FLOWERS!"



MY OLD FRIEND, JERRY FIERMAN, HERE PROPOSING A TOAST, READ SCRIPTURE ABOUT JONATHAN & DAVID AS PART OF THE CEREMONY.



JOHN HELIKER LOOKED ELEGANT. MIRIAM DAVIS JUST HAD A VERY GOOD TIME.

january 28th
By Suzanne Phillips, M.D.

david and randy
got married today
with a real priest
and everything
champagne, flowers
two-tiered cake
and lots of friends

david and randy
got married today - as
we gathered around
david's bed
no sweeter altar
anywhere
don't you always
cry at weddings?

david and randy
held hands today
exchanging vows
life partners
now david has a ring
it's official, he says
i can die in peace

david and randy
got married today
to have and to hold in sickness and in health
till death do us part

don't you always cry
at weddings?



SUZANNE GIVES ME MUCH NEEDED SUPPORT AT THE WEDDING.



EVEN MORE BEAUTIFUL ON THE INSIDE THAN ON THE OUTSIDE! SUZANNE POSES IN FRONT OF A FRAMED PICTURE & POEM SHE WROTE MEMORIALIZING MAX NAVARRE. DAVID FRAMED IT FOR ME AS A SURPRISE. SUZANNE SAW IT IN MY WINDOW A COUPLE YEARS AGO AND THAT'S HOW WE MET.



Randy Wicker and David Comb, as they appeared in 1983.

Couple hurt by Williams' move

Resignation angers pair married by Williams

By Barbara Tunick

After 17 years together, Randy Wicker has always considered himself to be married to his mate, David Combs. On Sunday, the Rev. Robert Williams of Hoboken performed the marriage ceremony as David lay in bed dying of AIDS.

Wicker asked Williams to marry the couple to fulfill David's "death-bed request." The same sex marriage was the Episcopal priest's first and could be his last following his resignation this week.

"David had always wanted a religious ceremony, but I'm an atheist," Wicker said. Williams, he said, made that wish come true. "He brought warmth and power to our

union. Our wedding meant more to us than any other single event" he said.

With eight close friends gathered in the flower-filled bedroom to witness the ceremony, Rev. Williams wrapped a shawl around the couple's hands symbolizing "the blessing of [their] union."

"Let these men find strength in their love which others have condemned," Williams said.

Guests brought flowers and bottles of champagne to the wedding. Randy bought David a four-pound box of chocolate. "This will probably be our last Valentine's Day together," he said.

During the ceremony Randy and David cried as they exchanged "things of value," a gold wedding band and a love poem. A friend recited from the *First Book of Samuel*: "The soul of Jonathon was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathon loved him as his own soul... Then Jonathon made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul.... And this was good in the sight of all the people and also in the sight of Saul's servants. The word of the Lord."

After the ceremony, David asked to speak

to Randy alone. "Now I feel I can die," he said.

When Randy read in Monday's *New York Times* that Williams had left Oasis, he was devastated. "Rev. Williams is the best thing that has happened to the Episcopal Church."

"They used his statements on monogamy as an excuse [to dismiss him]. They are taking a molehill and making it into a mountain. He condemns promiscuity. He is not advocating it. They are distorting and misrepresenting his statements. It's disgraceful what they are doing to him just because they can't agree about how many angels should dance on the head of a pin," he said angrily.

David's bridal bouquet of long-stemmed roses were still in a basket in the corner of the bedroom when Randy sat down and wrote a letter to Williams. "While I doubt testimonials on your behalf by an atheist like myself will do you much good in the ecclesiastical courts, please feel free to offer it... to any faithful person as evidence of even 'the blind' being able 'to see' the good you do," he wrote.

P.S. } I THINK I'LL FILL IN BETWEEN THE LINES RIGHT HERE. THE HOUR IS
LATE BUT I'VE CAUGHT A SECOND WIND. I'LL DO MY BEST TO PICK YOU UP
OFF THE FLOOR. ~~MAYBE~~ ~~EVEN~~ MAKE YOU SMILE! TRY MY MAGIC WITH WORDS
P. TO TOUCH YOUR HEART WITH HOLIDAY CHEER!

"THE WEDDING OF MY LIFE"

~ by yours truly ~

Forgive the poor quality of the carbon of my furious letter to the good Reverend. It was late. I had been drinking. And the alcohol hardly kept my blood from boiling over.

But I wasn't so drunk that I didn't wait until the next morning to mail my challenge, with that crisp \$100 bill attached, while I stone cold sober. I figured there was nothing like cold cash to force a response even, or especially, from a so-called man of God.

But that very afternoon, I started feeling a bit uneasy about the bravado and passion of my stirring, secular, moral challenge to Rev. Williams. The local newspaper announced that a support group for gay people with Aids was being organized via his Oasis ministry. I gulped to myself a bit sheepishly.

So, when Mr. Filthy Lucre & my shrill note produced an almost instantaneous response from Rev. Williams, I quickly cooled the fire in my belly, calmly 'apologized' for any 'excessive emotionalism' in my note - explaining I sought "consultation not confrontation" - abjectly apologizing for having so crudely enclosed money, and with obvious embarrassment, ~~Told him~~ I didn't want it back--that since I'd read about the support group, whatever happened, I'd like him to keep it & use it for that purpose.

With good gentlemanly grace, Rev. Williams insisted that he would return my money and that, then, I could do with it as I pleased. I could tell he was cut from much better cloth than any Jim Bakker. We simultaneously regretted all our previous 'miscommunications' and/or 'misunderstandings' and arranged for him to come talk with David and myself the next evening around six.

The next evening, as the clock struck, the phone rang. But David was sleeping & not having a good day. We delayed everything 24 hours. The next day, as the clock struck, the phone rang once more. Again bad timing. I'd given Rev. Williams my '86 Xmas letter about David's first year of illness. I could only wonder what he thought. But, at least, now he seemed willing -even eager- to talk. It wouldn't be until weeks later that I would discover I had fortunately stumbled upon the one ordained Episcopal priest with the compassion and courage to hear my plea and answer our call. And, then, another day, bad timing again!

"Tomorrow is my last day in town until Sunday," Rev. Williams volunteered. "Perhaps you should come to the church alone, tomorrow, at noon. I'll be upstairs in the rectory. We can talk."

"Now, Randy," David scolded as I set out for my meetin' with the reverend the next morning, "I'm serious about this. Don't you go picking a fight with this man!!!" Now, why would David even say such a thing???

If there is a God, he did his level best to stop me that morning. The heavens opened up and the rain came down in a torrent. Swollen rivers swirled where gutters used to be. Cars drowned out in mid-intersection. Half my umbrella collapsed in the howling wind.

But determinedly, this good atheist slogged on--forging the rivers, tilting into the wind, shivering as the wet chill of water crept up past my kneecaps to the middle of my thighs.

And through it all, I wondered if this was really *happening*. Had I lost all sanity? How had it come to be that this clear-thinking, intelligent, out & proud gay atheist, had allowed his life to come to this? Oh, remember this tale, and never really believe that you would never find yourself "doing-such-and-such."

Life is strange. Love destroys pride and annihilates the intellect.

Feeling a bit sheepish, like a wet rat that had just scurried in, dripping water everywhere, I climbed the stairs to the Reverend's office.

He greeted me, quickly slipped the familiar white envelope into my hand, ~~then~~ stood back with one hand resting on his stomach in a pose that reminded me of Napoleon, listening to me blather on. (And I always thought preachers did all the talking.)

He said little. I could only wonder if I actually frightened him a bit. After all, I was hardly your typical marriage applicant. And little did I dream that this wedding, my first (and probably last), would also be his first "blessing" of a gay union! He must have been a bit nervous & excited too.

"Well, you have a choice between a civil type exchange of vows or a full traditional church ceremony." Rev. Williams ventured, indicating for the first time his willingness to preside.

"Oh, a traditional, full church ceremony," I replied immediately. I knew what David would want. This was no time for hair-splitting, knit-picking political correctness. By now, I had already gone over the waterfalls in a barrell & had decided if we were going to do it--damn it! (forgive the language-I only thought it) If I was going to get married this one time in my life, I was going to do it right.

We set 5:30 p.m., Sunday, (just three days away) as the annointed hour, at home, in our apartment. Outside, the sunshine had driven away the clouds. And trembling with excitement, brimming with joy, I headed home to share the good news with David.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE IT! I CAN'T BELIEVE IT!" I shouted to myself ^{mentally} as I skipped down the street. "I'M ACTUALLY GOING TO GET MARRIED! SUNDAY'S GOING TO BE MY WEDDING DAY! YIPPEEE!!!!"

"Oh, I don't know if I'll be up to that," David sighed upon hearing I had opted for the traditional church ceremony. "I'll probably be so sick I'll have to lay in a pew most of the time." He thought I meant we were going to have it down at the church. We both laughed at that misunderstanding.

We picked our guest list with care. Some friends I'd thought David would want invited were passed over. Others, like Miriam, David's next door neighbor at Bloomfield Street, surprised David by eagerly accepting our invitation.

"You can invite her," David had counseled, "but I really doubt Miriam is going to want to come to a fag wedding." David sometimes had a way of underestimating people. Negativism was always one of his problems.

Only three days to get ready. George & I went shopping the avenue. Main Street Hoboken was to quickly reap over a thousand dollars feeding, decorating, flowering and inebriating the town's first gay wedding.

"No bride and groom on that wedding cake please. We'll take the two love birds instead." "A dozen bottles of that \$22 champagne, please. (How much can 15 people drink?) And a dozen bottles of that pink \$12 stuff too." (And you know which one everyone preferred!)

"That five-pound box of chocolates please. And a dozen big white glossy bows. And wedding wrap, wedding plates, wedding cups, wedding napkins."

"And where are the roses? Where are the Calla lillies?" David chided.

On Sunday, the florist delivered the bridal bouquet--a dozen red roses, two lavender ones, two Cala Lilies & two Birds of Paradise. But, as the guests poured through the door, the flowers mounted--bouquet upon bouquet--testing George's skills at arranging in the bathroom.

But Sunday was not a good day for David. The bride was tempermental, the groom a nervous wreck. The first guest to arrive was Jane Rosett, former editor of the PWA Newsline whose unexpected visit to NYU's Emergency Room, camera & tape recorder in hand, had caused enough of a stir--along with zeroxed copies of my handwritten "Emergency Room Games"--and some bravado on my own part invoking the good name of "Wicker" & threatening to have "my good friend Judy Wicker call 'Uncle Tom Wicker' at the N.Y. Times" smashed down that Emergency Room door and propelled us upstairs to hqpe and the best treatment money could buy.

Jane was freelancing. I asked her to do photography at my wedding as a professional assignment. I wanted pictures. I could hardly take them myself.

While dressing, I told her of the exhilarating experience I had marching with the People-With-Aids-Coalition down 5th Ave. every Gay Pride Day, how seeing the explosion of support from onlookers made me wish "I could carry a video camera on my shoulder & share that invigorating experience with every person with Aids in the world."

Rev. Williams arrived around 6:00 p.m. He & I entered the bedroom to speak with David.

"I want you to marry Randy & I," David announced solemnly. "Here. Now, With just the three of us in here." I was speechless. What could I say?

"Well, David," Rev. Williams replied calmly, "I don't think that would really be appropriate. A wedding is a declaration and celebration, an exchange of vows between two people--something they share with their friends and the world." (Oh, Rev. Williams, you converted this atheist's heart with those soothing words of wisdom. What a masterful stroke. What talent. What psychology. I'll never believe in God, but I'll forever respect the skill of your ministry. You are truly wonderful.)

"Oooohhh," David conceded (something he rarely did), "go ahead Randy. Invite them ALL IN!!!"

"No, David," I replied, "it's a small room here. I'll go out and invite those who I think you'd want to come in."

And of the sixteen guests, I chose eight. Marj had agreed to read David's love poem to me (I hate jewelry & this I chose instead of a ring- the most beautiful thing he'd ever given me.) Big wonderful momma. Thinking of you makes me cry....(and the orderves were delicious!)

And there was Suzanne. Sweet angel of mercy. Gleaming light in the darkest night.

And Willie & Bob--real family, real soldiers. How could I have survived all this without you?

And Jerry Fierman, a friend of 25+ years. So serious. So concerned for my welfare. What a shame our flame flickered out so long ago.

And Miriam. Conventional little Jewish girl. Your tears over my 86 Xmas letters were the greatest compliment. May those things you tack on your doorway give you the protection, bring you the luck, you so amply deserve. You were a true & caring friend.

And David Salsbury. Thank you for so lovingly spooning nourishment into David. He loved the way you fed him in the hospital. He knew you would cherish the china he gave you. You said our wedding "filled you with hope, gave you something to strive for, to dream of." You deserve a good man, a great love. May that be your future.

And Marsha. What a special place you won in David's heart toward the end. I still smile recalling the day David listed "the three men he loved most in life-- me, you & Dr. Sonnabend."

Of course. You never forget those little details from your wedding. David & I had always vied for the affection of our pets. Since David was the 'disciplinarian' & I, the "spoiler,"--I always seemed to win.

The little yorkies, Sunshine & Tinker, they loved me the most. I never screamed at them for soiling the carpet. Even Koi-nu (the little one of last Xmas letter fame) seemed to prefer me--I teased & played with her with my toe--never anything disciplinary.

"Koo-ee will come to me before you," I chided years ago.

"Keep that up & you can take her home and keep her at your apartment from now on," David retaliated. Of course, I simply cringed. I couldn't help it if I was so popular.

But David finally had one animal that was his and his alone--above and beyond all the enticements anyone else could offer. That animal would lie with him on his deathbed, unperturbed, hours after his death. (What ever happened to those cats-sense-death-and-get-spooked stories?)

Zen, the big black male cat David & Michael Toy had gotten as their first pet. In the end, it was Zen who loyally stayed with David on couch & bed - having no use for anyone else--till the very end.

Yet, as the wedding ceremony was starting, Zen fled the bedroom. Koo-ee hopped up on the bed--literally, as the vows commenced. Visions of pushing tonguey~little~puppy away in the middle of it all evaporated as she curled up by David's leg and snoozed in for the rest of the ceremony.

And how silly I felt when the sniffles began, when my voice trembled and partially broke, when the tears trickled down my cheeks and onto the floor. I didn't discover till later that lots of people cry at weddings.

Afterwards, each of the selected guests came up & congratulated us, kissed David & said goodbye.

"Now I feel like I can die in peace," David sighed when, once again, we were alone.

"Good night, my husband," David cooed as we held each other later that evening after all the guests were gone and it was time to sleep.

"Good night, my love." I replied, kissing him on the lips and then on the forehead one last time.

And that, my friends, is the story of my wedding.

NEWS

ADDITIONAL COMPLAINANTS & WITNESSES SOUGHT TO BOLSTER DISCRIMINATION CHARGES AGAINST NYU MEDICAL CENTER

New York City's Commission on Human Rights AIDS Discrimination Unit is investigating complaints against NYU Medical Center about discrimination against patients with AIDS or HIV-Infection.

The initial complaint was filed in late November by David Combs whose week long wait for a private room in NYU Medical Center's Emergency Room corridor was described in an article entitled "Emergency Room Games" in November's *Newsline*. That report, although written specifically for *Newsline* first appeared in *Outweek*, 10/8/89.

Combs' complaint charges that NYU's policy requiring all HIV-positive patients have private rooms is "a discriminatory policy whereby patients with AIDS are denied the right to be admitted to approximately 90%" of potentially available beds.

"This policy is in place allegedly to protect PWA's from the infection risks posed by sharing a hospital room," Combs' complaint continues. "I charge that this policy is unscientific and discriminatory in that the result is that PWA's are left in public hallways for many days and as a result, are subject to increased contact with patients as well as the general public."

Combs and Wicker were inspired to press their charges after reading in November's *Newsline* that a similar legal action by the Whitman-Walker Clinic, Inc. and Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund against Washington D.C.'s Howard University Hospital resulted in a settlement whereby that hospital agreed to adopt a hospital-wide policy permitting persons with AIDS or HIV infection to be treated on all wards and in all rooms of the hospital.

Although Combs successfully endured a six day wait for a room in September, PWA Coalition stalwart Dr. Sal Licata was not so fortunate three months later in December.

Licata "was sent home" after spending nine days on a gurney in NYU's Emergency Room Corridor and reportedly "refusing to undergo a colonoscopy and other tests in the hallway."

While there, he was visited by Ron Christopher, a friend and former colleague at the AIDS Training Institute of the NYC Dept. of Health, who was incredulous and outraged.

"I'm so glad that you came to visit me so you could witness this," Christopher quotes Licata as telling him in an angry letter he sent to Dr. David Axelrod, Commissioner of Health, in Albany, detailing his observations.

"The increased anxiety, stress and depression that came over Dr. Licata during this nine day period," Christopher wrote, "were also marked by an increase in his mental confusion and mounting anger with conditions in the hospital."

Sal Licata died at home a couple weeks later without having filed a complaint challenging NYU's policies. Combs' complaint about the same conditions has been structured such that, although still living, the legal action seeking a change in NYU's policies can be pursued by his lifemate Randy Wicker, and the NYC AIDS Discrimination Unit even without his continued survival.

Filing and successfully pursuing a discrimination complaint with the Human Rights Division usually requires anywhere from several months up to even a year or more. Many

PWAs make frantic calls from corridor payphones seeking assistance in getting a bed but fail to pursue matters further once they discover immediate action is impossible.

Officials and investigators dealing with such complaints are usually unwilling to make any public statements about such matters early in the process beyond verifying that a complaint, or complaints, have been filed and that a fact finding investigation is in process.

However, they do concede that similar complaints about a specific situation or institution "strengthen one another" and "increase the likelihood" that the matter will be given priority.

The NYC Commission on Human Rights, AIDS Discrimination Unit, is located at 52 Duane Street, 7th floor, NYC, NY 10007. (212) 566-7638. One should phone first and make an appointment.

Anyone wishing to file a complaint specifically against NYU Medical Center can contact those mentioned above and each other by calling (212) 255-1439 afternoons and evenings.

NOTE: WHILE DAVID SLOWLY LOST THE GROUND AT HOME WHICH WE HAD SO PAINFULLY GAINED AT NYU, I RESOLVED TO DO WHATEVER POSSIBLE TO SEE THAT TOMORROW'S AIDS PATIENTS WERE NOT SUBJECTED TO "EMERGENCY ROOM GAMES."

IT TOOK MUCH RUNNING AROUND, GETTING DOCUMENTS SIGNED, NOTARIZED AND FILED. BY EARLY FEBRUARY '90, NYU HAD ABANDONED IT'S "PRIVATE ROOMS ONLY" POLICY FOR AIDS PATIENTS--EVALUATING ALL PATIENTS IN THE EMERGENCY ROOM ON A DAILY BASIS & ASSIGNING BEDS ON THE BASIS OF NEED.

BUREAUCRATS HAVE A WAY OF MAKING ANYTHING TAKE FOREVER. THIS PAST SUMMER, WE SIGNED PAPERS TO FORCE NYU MEDICAL CENTER TO MAKE DAVID COMBS' MEDICAL RECORDS AVAILABLE TO THE AIDS DIVISION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION.

AND, MUCH TO MY AMAZEMENT, THE ARTICLE REPRINTED BELOW APPEARED ON PAGE B3 OF THE NEW YORK TIMES JUST YESTERDAY! DAVID'S & MY FIGHT SEEMED TO BE AMOUNTING TO SOMETHING. WHAT SWEET IRONY! DAVID COMBS MADE THE NEW YORK TIMES FOR THE FIRST TIME TEN MONTHS AFTER HIS DEATH.

"YES, RANDY," I CAN ALMOST HEAR SOME OF YOU BELIEVERS OUT THERE BEGIN TO WHISPER, "THERE IS A SANTA CLAUS...AND A GOD..."

THE NEW YORK TIMES **METROPOLITAN** FRIDAY, DECEMBER 21, 1990 33

Hospital Accused of Keeping 2 AIDS Patients in Hallway

By THOMAS MORGAN

New York City's Human Rights Commission yesterday accused the New York University Medical Center of discriminating against two men with AIDS, through a policy that kept them on beds in hallways instead of placing them in semi-private rooms.

The findings were on complaints filed last year by the AIDS patients, David Combs and Ronald James, both of whom have died. The men said they were forced to sleep on gurneys in an emergency room hallway for many days because no private rooms were available. The hospital's policy was not to place AIDS patients in semi-private rooms with other patients.

Mr. Combs and Mr. James said that in the hallways they were exposed to noise, improper care and other infections.

The incidents occurred in late 1989. John Deats, a Medical Center spokesman, said yesterday that the hospital changed its policy last February and now places AIDS patients in semi-private rooms.

He said the old policy grew out of concern that AIDS patients, with weakened immune systems, would be endangered if put in a room with people infected with other diseases. The policy was changed, he said, when the hospital learned through evolving medical testimony that there was no risk.

Mr. Deats said the hospital had received no complaints from patients about being in rooms with AIDS sufferers.

The hospital is the first to be charged by the commission in a case involving room accommodations for AIDS patients.

Lawyers for the Lambda Legal Defense Fund, a gay advocacy group that is representing Mr. James, and lawyers for the commission said they did not know how many other hospitals had policies similar to the one criticized in yesterday's findings.

Lawyers who represent the two men's estates are seeking compensatory damages. An administrative law judge will hear the case. A hearing date has not been set.

16 Days in Emergency

Lonnie Soury, a spokesman for the Human Rights Commission, said Mr. James, in his complaint, had described going to the medical center's emergency room twice, on Oct. 3 and on Oct. 31, 1989.

The first time, he said, he slept on a gurney for five days. During that visit, he said, his vital signs dropped, and he required heart-monitoring equipment

Semi-private rooms were off limits.

and a cooling blanket, both of which were hooked up in the hallways. The second time he was treated in the hallway for 11 days, the complaint said.

"It was a time when he needed not only intensive care, but privacy and dignity," said Robert Hershman, Mr. James's companion.

Mr. Combs's complaint said he was placed on a gurney in the emergency room corridor on Sept. 12, 1989, and made to stay there for six days.

Mr. Deats said that on any given day, 30 to 50 AIDS patients occupy beds at the hospital. "On any given night we have people in the hallways of the emergency room because we get more patients than we have emergency room beds," he said, "and more patients with particular illnesses than we have hospital beds for those illnesses. All the hospitals in the city suffer from emergency room overcrowding."

DAVID COMBS
6/5/52 - 2/17/90
By Randy Wicker

For David & I, it was love the first night, if not at first sight. We met one afternoon in Feb. '72. I invited him home that evening and he just never left.

David's stunning design abilities, although hampered by a very limited budget, soon transformed our big shabby apartment into a breathtakingly beautiful palace.

David got me into the antique business. He introduced me to the wondrous world of flea markets. We rented a small \$200-a-month shop in July '74 and stocked it with the furnishings from our apartment.

David's magic infused that small shop with a sparkle, slowly transforming it into the jewel that still glitters and impresses so many who visit our lighting store on Hudson Street just north of Christopher.

As much as we loved each other, David and I were so different. If something was exquisite, he'd pay almost anything for it. Then he'd never want to let it go. I bought anything I knew I could resell. David really had class and taste; I really didn't! David was a true artist. I was only a businessman.

We argued passionately. Yet I can't remember a single argument either of us actually ever won. We were both so strong-willed, so stubborn.

Years ago, at the first signs of David's possible illness, I made sure we had ample insurance, sought out PWA support groups, avidly read *Newsline*, *GMHC Treatment News*, etc., tried to stay informed. David's refuge was denial. He refused testing because he feared a massive round-up and quarantine. He avoided doctors because of bad past experiences. Once, I did manage to drag him to a PWArc support group. But, it just wasn't for him. He never went again.

"I guess the death sentence's official," he announced gloomily after finally being hospitalized this past July with PCP and having his HIV test come back positive.

David's hospital experiences only reinforced his skepticism about medicine. After reflating, his lung partially collapsed again. An operation to implant a Hickman catheter failed -- the surgeon claimed David's chest veins were too small.

Two months later, a week after returning home, a life threatening bout of diarrhea sent us running for help again -- this time to NYU Medical Center where, after six days in the Emergency Room corridor, we finally got our room.

And while NYU pulled David back from that "bright light" he recalled seeing in the distance when they said he was dying and gave him five more months of life, the detached pronouncements of our "doom'n'gloom" admitting physician forever destroyed what little hope David still retained.

"David's going to die," was his first statement to me. And ultimately, his defining comment. The hope medicine had finally offered with one hand was thereby taken away by the other.

These past months, no matter how hard I spun my wheels, I couldn't fight David's battle for him, nor could I force him to do so.

I cared for him, stayed with him almost constantly, did all I could. On January 28th, we had the deathbed wedding he so desired. That day, I slipped the same wedding band onto his finger, and pledged to him my love as I had the first time we "wed" -- just he & I alone on a moonlit night in Brooklyn's Botanical Gardens in June '72.

David died at home, as he wished to, on Saturday night, February 17th, with those of us who loved him at his side.

How anti-climatic Mr. Death's much anticipated arrival turned out to be! No struggle to breathe. No thrashing about. No moaning. No seizures. No apparent pain. David just simply stopped breathing. One day of diarrhea had caused him more discomfort; one night's sweat more distress.

Our fear of death had been simply the "horror" of the turning doorknob, the "terror" of the invisibly-pushed slowly opening door. It was that fear of the unseen, the anticipation of death, the process and battle preceding it, which had caused us suffering and anguish -- not the act of dying itself.

"I've seen countless deaths," Suzanne Phillips relates, "and they've all been peaceful. But when I tell some PWAs, some AIDS activists that, sometimes they get angry and call me 'the Angel of Death.'"

"I've seen many deaths over my 15 years as a physician," a member of my care-partner support group agreed. "And what you describe is quite typical. I've never seen a death that wasn't peaceful, never one that involved anguish and thrashing about."

And so, dear David, I know you are no more. Through you I learned so much about living, about loving, and, finally -- perhaps, most importantly of all -- about dying.

When the storm clouds gather, be they of AIDS or of age, and the nasty winds begin to blow, I'll stage my best fight my way. Perhaps, once again, I'll get a reprieve -- escape the beckoning bright light, by breaking down that emergency room door!

But when I hear the beams cracking and see the walls of this house I call my body commencing to give way, Sweetheart, I'll think of you and I'll smile.

Because, now I have seen it all before. Thanks to you, I'm not so damn afraid of dying anymore!!

David Combs 1952-1990

David Combs died February 17th of AIDS while at home surrounded by his loved ones. David owned and operated Uplift Lighting, an art deco lighting shop on Hudson Street in Greenwich Village, along with his lifemate Randy Wicker.

Combs, who had been ill for a long time, chose to deal with his illness without medical assistance until last summer. In September, his and Wicker's ordeal of waiting in NYU Medical Center's Emergency Room corridors for six days before finally succeeding in obtaining a room, was the subject of an *Outweek* article, "Emergency Room Games," October 6, 1989.



As a result of that experience, a legal complaint was filed with NYC's AIDS Discrimination Unit of the Human Rights Commission challenging NYU's "private rooms only" policy for HIV-positive patients.

Because of a barrage of other complaints and pressure from GMHC's Ombudsman Office and the Lambda Legal Defense Fund, NYU Medical Center has changed its policies.

On January 18th, Combs and Wicker were wed by Rev. Robert Williams, an openly-gay Episcopalian priest, in their

apartment in Marineview Plaza in Hoboken. That wedding was sympathetically featured in the local paper, the *Hoboken Reporter*.

David Combs was cremated. He wished his ashes to be held and mixed with those of his lifemate, Randy Wicker, and then scattered together.

A "Quilt-panel Memorial Party" will be held this spring. Donations can be made in his name to the PWA Coalition's Giving Fund, 31 W. 26th St., New York, NY 10010.

—Randy Wicker

READING BY MARJORIE PEASE AT THE
WEDDING OF
RANDY WICHER & DAVID COMBS
JANUARY 28, 1990

Christmas 1986

To Randy,

Our souls are two broad boards,
oiled & stained, set up to form
a table.

The jointure, planed,
is well-defined.

The tincture of the grain
glistens with wax & turpentine.

Euphonious morning light.

The solid grains
make scintillations
doubly bright. At dusk,
again affirming weight,
they celebrate their solid state.

The soul doth shine & glisten.

It dances:

It loves its substance,

It loves its tatters,

It loves its woes,

It loves its laughter.

You have taught me, defined
to me-'Love'

I love you,

David

Quilt Panel Sketch

DAVID
1952-



COMBS
- 19 - -

Dearest DAVID,

You UNDER-STOOD beauty. Where
IT WAS, YOU MADE IT SPARKIE!
Where it WASN'T, YOU CREATED IT.

MY LOVE ALWAYS,
RANDY
1938 -

Footnote:

THE PANEL MEASURES SIX FEET BY THREE FEET. IT IS DONE IN GOLD LETTERING ON BLUE VELVET BACKGROUND. IT WAS DONE BY RANDY'S MOTHER, IRIS, AND REQUIRED MANY HOURS OF PAINFUL LABOR BECAUSE OF IRIS'S ARTHRITIS IN HER HANDS.

THE BLESSING OF THE UNION OF
DAVID COMBS AND RANDY WICKER

January 28, 1990
Hoboken, New Jersey

The Opening Exhortation

Celebrant

Dear People of God: We have come together in the presence of God to celebrate and bless the love between David and Randy; to thank God for their commitment to each other, and to ask God's blessing on their continued life together.

All love comes of God, and a particular bond and covenant like that between David and Randy is a sign to us of the bond between Christ and the Church, between God and the Creation.

We affirm we are all created in the image of God; and the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity teaches us the very nature of God is loving relationship.

A holy union such as that between David and Randy is a gift of our loving Creator, for their mutual companionship, comfort, and growth. It is a source of strength upon which they may draw.

As their family, their friends, and their community, we are asked not only to celebrate with them, but to witness their vows and pledge our support of their continued life together.

The Declaration of Consent

Celebrant

David, do you affirm Randy to be your partner in life, and will you here make covenant with him before all others, to live, work, pray, and celebrate together, in sickness and health, in prosperity and adversity, as long as you both shall live?

David I will.

Celebrant

Randy, do you affirm David to be your partner in life, and will you here make covenant with him before all others, to live, work, pray, and celebrate together, in sickness and health, in prosperity and adversity, as long as you both shall live?

Randy I will.

Celebrant

Will all of you witnessing this covenant do all in your power to uphold these two persons in their life together?

Witnesses We will.

The Ministry of the Word

The Collect

Celebrant The Lord be with you.
People And also with you.
Celebrant Let us pray.

O gracious and loving God, you saw that it was not good for us to be alone, and you created the gift of companionship to comfort and strengthen us. Look mercifully upon these two men who come before you seeking your blessing, and assist them with your grace, that with true fidelity and steadfast love they may honor and keep the covenant they make; through Jesus Christ our Savior, the King of Love, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

People Amen.

The First Reading: A Poem by David Combs

The Second Reading: From The First Book of Samuel.

The Holy Gospel: John 15:7-12

Celebrant The Holy Gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ according to John.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

The Gospel of Christ.

The Covenant

David In the Name of God, Randy, I take you to be my partner in life; in sickness and health, in prosperity and adversity, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.

Randy In the Name of God, David, I take you to be my partner in life; in sickness and health, in prosperity and adversity, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.

Celebrant Bless, O Lord, this ring to be a sign of the covenant by which these men have bound themselves to each other; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

David Randy, I give you this ring as a symbol of my love. With my body I worship you, and with all that I am and all that I have, I honor you.

Celebrant Bless, O Lord, this poem, a work of human creativity, to be a sign of the covenant by which these men have bound themselves to each other; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Randy David, I give you this poem as a symbol of my love. With my body I worship you, and with all that I am and all that I have, I honor you.

David and Randy join hands, and the Celebrant binds their hands together with the stole.

Celebrant David and Randy have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, by the joining of hands, and by the giving and receiving of gifts. We celebrate their covenant before God and with each other, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder.

People Amen.

The Prayers

[To each petition, the people respond Amen.]

Intercessor Let us pray.

Eternal God, creator and preserver of all life, author of salvation, and giver of grace: Look with favor upon the world you have made, and for which your Son gave his life, and especially upon this couple who have made covenant before you. Amen.

Give them wisdom and devotion in the ordering of their common life, that each may be to the other a strength in need, a counselor in perplexity, a comfort in sorrow, and a companion in joy. Amen.

Grant that their wills may be so knit together in your will, and their spirits in your Spirit, that they may grow in love and peace with you and with one another all the days of their life. Amen.

Give them grace, when they hurt each other, to recognize and acknowledge their fault, and to seek each other's forgiveness and yours. Amen.

Give them strength to stand firm in their commitment against the disapproval and discouragement of a society so marred by sin that it would deny their love. Amen.

Make their life together a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair. Amen.

Send your blessing upon their families, that they may grow in mutual love and respect to the honor of your Name. Amen.

Give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others; with a passion for justice and a particular concern for the marginalized and oppressed. Amen.

Grant that all who have witnessed this covenant may find their own relationships strengthened and their loyalties confirmed. Amen.

Grant that the bonds of our common humanity, by which all your children are united one to another, and the living to the dead, may be so transformed by your grace that your will may be done on earth as it is in heaven; where you live and reign with the Son and the Holy Spirit, in perfect unity, now and for ever. Amen.

The Blessing of the Covenant

Celebrant

Most gracious God, we give thanks to you for your tender love in sending Jesus Christ to come among us, to assume and consecrate our human flesh, and to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world. We thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, who binds us together with cords of love; and we thank you for providing human companionship as a remedy against loneliness and fear. Pour out the abundance of your blessing upon David and Randy. Defend them from every enemy. Lead them into all joy. Let their love for each other be a seal upon their hearts, a mantle about their shoulders, and a crown upon their foreheads. Bless them in their work and in their companionship; in their sleeping and in their waking; in their joys and their sorrows; in their life and in their death. Finally bring them, with all your saints to that heavenly table of the marriage feast of the Lamb.

We ask your blessing through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

God the Creator, God the Incarnate Word, God the Holy Spirit, bless, preserve, and keep you; the Lord mercifully with favor look upon you, and fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace; that you may faithfully live together in this life, and in the age to come have life everlasting. Amen.

The Peace

Celebrant	The peace of Christ be always with you.
People	And also with you.

The couple exchange a greeting with each other and then with the others present.

December 20, 1990

1989-

Happy Holidays

1990

Dear Survivor,

Well, it's that time of year again. Pump out warm greetings. Gather around hearth & home. Eat too much. Drink too much. Spend too much. And don't forget to stock a tank of laughing gas for New Year's Eve!

A thousand pages of Xmas letter has been composed in my head during this past year. Too much to say; too little time. Last year's cheery, upbeat, inspirational note got handwritten--but neither typed, nor printed, nor sent. David's rage at his impending death spilled over from the next room causing everything to grind to a halt.

I wish I had a more intimate acquaintance with history. How did survivors celebrate the "Holidays" during the plague? Did they decorate the death carts with holly? Dance around the funeral pyres of the deceased? Spoon plum pudding into the cracked, fevered mouths of the dying? Could even those 'still healthy' truly celebrate 'being alive'?

Nearly half of those receiving this letter in years past are either dead, or infected & waiting. If this holocaust has spared you and yours, do rejoice, & let me rejoice with you. And let's draw strength from the knowledge that someday, hopefully soon, today's plague will fade into history. ~~May we,~~ nor our children, nor our children's children ever suffer like this again.

How're things going? Not so bad. I've run out of tears. The aches inside have turned to numbness. After being driven mad with frustration over not having the time to do the letter I composed, planned, intended--to the point of tearing Christmas cards off the mirror and falling into a two day fit of depression--I've resolved to write what little I can since words sent with love can sometimes comfort and heal in a way no medicine can.

It was reading the Snoopi Botten profile (among attached documents) in a newspaper from Minnesota during last night's interminable bout of torturous insomnia that made me realize how fortunate I am/ have been/ So, credit this year's letter to a musician named Snoopi & a writer named Valinda--neither of whom I'd ever heard of before.

Briefly, the bad news & then some of the good. After that, you'll have to wade through the attached assorted reprints and let your imagination fill in the blanks.

Despite our best efforts, David Combs died at home Feb. 17th--three weeks after our wedding & five months after our dramatic victory at NYU's Emergency Room. David Cordonat, my first employee & dear friend since 1970 died two weeks earlier.

Both Marsha & George still live with me--they were unbelievable troopers in helping to care for David--and both are struggling with the early stages of Aids. Marsha had a mental breakdown this fall and was hospitalized with shingles. George struggles with a rash that won't go away and has to have nearly all his teeth removed after the first of the year.

Peter Ogren, with whom I lived for ten years before meeting David Combs died a couple weeks ago from Aids dementia. My good friend and helper, Michael Hulbert, died at home December 3rd.

Willie & his lover Bob did an incredible job running the shop during the ^{final two} months I stayed home to care for David. But collapsing health landed them both back in Baltimore. Willie's on disability. Bob's still able to work.

I could go on & on but the names would be meaningless for many of you--and, in some cases, I'd probably be violating confidences...if I already haven't. Briefly put, outside of my blood relatives, every one of the dozen or so people closest to me--with maybe a couple un-tested exceptions-- is either sick and/or infected. And one of them just had a heart attack, brought on in part from the trauma of losing his lifemate to Aids a few weeks ago. Another is HIV negative but has another obscure bone marrow disease which is life threatening.

And the good news? More than you would think. Above all, discovering at the age of 52, what an incredibly wonderful woman I have for a mother. After joining me on a "memorial" trip for David (the October before his death) to view the final showing of The Quilt in Washington, D.C., she dusted off her finest sewing skills and spent countless, painful, arthritic hours making a royal blue velvet & gold panel in his honor. No mother ever gave any son a gift so beautiful, so filled with love.

Good news? Discovering the great capacity for good in those around you. Willie, comfortably ensconced in Baltimore & involved in the first real long-term relationship in his life, dropped everything and spent three out of every four weeks alone in NYC at the shop so I could stay in the hospital and/or at home with David. *from July through Dec.*

Marsha & George did anything asked. Never complaining. Willing to sleep all night in an emergency room corridor--or wash load after load of shitty sheets--or change soiled bedding at 4:30 A.M.

And at the darkest hours, ~~your~~ faith in humanity was restored by the helping hands of good samaritans--wonderful nurses with an unbelievable human touch; Suzanne Phillips, a resident doctor & acquaintance from People With Aids Coalition & Act Up who volunteered to come to Hoboken 11:00 p.m. one Saturday evening when David was stranded without medical help & was experiencing difficulty breathing--and who, ultimately, prevailed on her good friend Dr. Joseph Sonnabend (living Saints--both of them, if such ever existed) to travel interstate & make house calls to ease David's final months; and last, but far from least, Marie Pease, a busy professional woman who found time (despite an incredible schedule) to be a stand-in mom^{ma} (David's real mother hadn't even sent him a birthday card the last 10 yrs) and special ally & buddy those last few months. It was her determination - buying us a tree, toting it in & helping to decorate it- that gave us what little Christmas cheer we had last year.

So, while 'officially' "it's-nobody's-damn-business-what-my-HIV-status-is" (if only HIV +'s exercise their right to privacy, it's pointless) ~~of the record~~ my test came back negative. So barring a slide into alcoholism, an anguished jump from the nearest bridge, or an unfortunate encounter with a mentally-deranged knife-wielding gun-toting crack addict hold-up man at the shop, I can gleefully look forward to the two traditional grim reapers in my family tree--heart trouble and/or cancer.

All of which brings me back to the articles & things comprising this year's disjointed tidings. I'll begin with that Snoopi profile which snapped ~~my~~ last night's waddling in self-pity, made me realize how truly fortunate I have been in life--but most of all, inspired me, touched my heart & renewed my awe for the power of the human spirit.

Merry Xmas

Profile: Snoopi Botten



Photo by Robyn Docherman

WE ARE EVERYWHERE

Snoopi. It started out as a nickname and became legal. Since Snoopi is becoming more well known, he wanted a name that was unusual, that people would remember. It is also a name with a meaning: Someone Needs One Other Person Indefinitely. Snoopi is a musician. He appears regularly at the Gay 90's Piano Bar. He is also a writer, an artist and a poet. Snoopi also has cerebral palsy.

Born in Duluth, Snoopi was put up for adoption at birth and was adopted by an older couple in Bloomington. His life was filled with sexual and emotional abuse. He was constantly told to "be realistic. You will never be able to do anything." One dream after another was shattered. At age 11 Snoopi attempted

AGE: 25

HOMETOWN: Born in Duluth, raised in Bloomington.

PERSON YOU MOST ADMIRE OR WERE MOST INFLUENCED

BY: Wonder Woman—we both have a persona that hides our inner abilities.

FAVORITE ENTERTAINER(S): Sandi Patti—she inspires me to use my gift.

FAVORITE MOVIE(S) OR SHOW(S): *Out of This World*.

FAVORITE BOOK(S) OR AUTHOR: I don't read much. I prefer to listen to music and I like to write!

HOBBY OR FAVORITE ACTIVITY: Typewriter art. I also seem to be collecting answering machines—I have four of them and they all work!

PETS/KIDS/FAVORITE TOY: My stuffed animal, Snoopy. He is more a friend than a toy.

WHAT I WANTED TO BE WHEN I GREW UP: A cop. I wanted to drive a police car, put the siren on and yell at people over the loud speaker.

WHAT I'M ACTUALLY DOING NOW: I really want to be a writer. I'd like to write an advice column because I have a lot of insights on many things.

BIGGEST ACHIEVEMENT SO FAR: Getting a rejection letter for one of my songs from Sandi Patti—only because the music wasn't her style.

FAVORITE ACTIVITY IN OUR COMMUNITY: The piano bar at the Gay 90's—I perform there.

MOST UNUSUAL THING EVER DONE: Wheeling home from downtown in my wheelchair at one or two in the morning.

PERSON YOU'D MOST LIKE TO MEET: Pernel Roberts. He is the cutest guy on T.V. (Pull out the bed!)

suicide. At age 12 he ran away from home. "Can you imagine this 12 year old in a wheelchair on 35W? I can laugh about it now." At age 16, Snoopi came out to his older sister, who helped him realize that there were others like him. "Now," he laughs, "the Gay 90's is like home."

Snoopi isn't one for just sitting around. He writes songs, and with the help of a music therapist, writes the music as well. He is an avid Ham radio operator (call sign KA0QJM) and talks to people all over the world. "I use sign language too, but it is really hard to hear it over the radio." He laughs. He likes to listen to talk shows—he finds them very stimulating. He also creates incredible works of art—on a typewriter. "I'm the only artist in Minnesota

who does typewriter art," he says. "A piece can take me anywhere from one hour to four weeks." He is currently looking for a market for both his art and his music. (You can contact him at 612/870-9278.)

He is also involved with his church and with a 12 step group; he does a lot of writing for their newsletters.

Snoopi doesn't think of himself as handicapped. It is simply a way for him to discover his many talents. "Every time someone learns something new, they have to face something in themselves," he says. "We all have potential in ourselves. Sometimes we have to stand back and see the impact we make."

—Valinda Lea McCarter

and
a
happy
&
healthy
New
Year's
as always
Randy

Randy Wicker's
Uplift Inc.
506 Hudson Street
New York City, NY 10014



DAVID GOT SUCH A KICK OUT OF THE JEWELRY I UNEARTHED. HE COULDN'T BELIEVE HE ACTUALLY USED TO WEAR IT ALL.



MARSHA & GORGE HAVE RUN BEDPANS AND CHANGED BEDDING NO MATTER HOW OFTEN.



DAVID GAVE HIS SISTER, PATRICIA, ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL CRYSTAL STUDENT LAMPS HE HAD EVER CREATED. HE HAD TO SHOW HER THE SECRETS OF GETTING THE CRYSTALS JUST RIGHT.



ZEN DIDN'T MIND THAT DAVID HAD AIDS AND SKINNY, SKINNY LEGS.



WHETHER SICK OR WELL, DAVID ALWAYS HAD STYLE.



SISTER PAT SPENT HER SUMMER VACATION WITH DAVID IN THE HOSPITAL. DURING THANKSGIVING, SHE DROVE HER THREE KIDS ALL THE WAY FROM OHIO SO THEY COULD VISIT ONE LAST TIME WITH "UNCLE DAVE."



MOTHER JOINED ME IN WASHINGTON, IN OCT. '89 FOR THE LAST FULL SHOWING OF THE QUILT ON THE WHITE HOUSE LAWN.



WILLIE'S MOTHER (L.) MET MINE FOR THE FIRST TIME. WE ALL VISITED THE QUILT TOGETHER.



MOTHER & I CHOSE COLORS FOR DAVID'S PANEL. THE EXPERIENCE TOUCHED HER DEEPLY. UPON RETURNING TO ARIZONA, SHE'D SPEND COUNTLESS HOURS MAKING ME THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PRESENT I EVER GOT IN MY LIFE.



WILLIE & BOB: NICEST, BRIGHTEST, CUTEST COUPLE IN ALL BALTIMORE! CREATIVE MASTER LAMPMAKERS! FANTASTIC CHEFS! WONDERFUL HOSTS!



GLISTENING METALLIC GOLD LETTERING & TRIM ON A RICH, ROYAL BLUE-VELVET BACKGROUND. I COMPOSED DAVID'S EPITAPH DURING A TORTUROUS, SLEEPLESS NIGHT THE DAY WE VIEWED THE QUILT. A BLOW-UP FABRIC TRANSFER OF OUR 1983 PHOTO IS IN THE MIDDLE.

L/14/90

Rev. J. Robert Williams
All Saints Episcopal Parish
Oasis Ministry
Hoboken, N.J.

Dr. Rev. Williams:

I've rejoiced over your ordination. I have been happy you are here in Hoboken. I read with interest about your Oasis Ministry for gay people. Although I am a well-known atheist, I support your outreach to gay Episcopalians and the walls of bigotry you have broken down within that denomination.

This is not an easy letter for me to write you. I've previously contacted you, given you an Xmas letter about my lifemate & myself and asked you to simply come three blocks down the street to discuss with my lifemate of 17 years & myself the possibility, requirements, etc., to be met should we seek a blessing or marriage ceremony under your auspices.

You made an appointment. Then you failed to keep it. Then, when I wrote you a letter about feeling "left at the altar," you called,--spoke to someone else in the household asking "you don't know who I am do you?"--and when they said "yes"--you had your excuse to never call again.

I see you make much of the fact in news articles that yours is not an "Aids ministry." To that, I can only say --pity!!!

But, today, my lifemate --the only person to whom I could in any way say I have been married to, would even marry publicly, etc.,-- when he, in one of his few minutes/hours of consciousness said to me: "I'd like to have that ceremony performed."--what could I tell him, except the truth, which I always speak: "Well, David I asked him to come over and talk to us about that possibility but he couldn't be bothered. I'm not sure we'd qualify--they might only do it for Episcopalians; and/or they might have lines requiring me to declare my belief in Jesus, etc, which I might find unacceptable. To swear before my fellow man, to you, to society, etc., everlasting love and sexual fidelity would be no problem. But this guy won't even come over to discuss it with us. But, I'll give it one more shot --for you.

And that is the story. I don't want acceptance or approval. I only want you to come over and discuss it. If there is a charge, enclosed is a \$100 cash don't payment & you don't even have to promise me a room at Heritage Village--is that the bottom line with you religionists? Cash, not decency or compassion or the willingness to answer a request for simple consultation from a mere three blocks away? Is my religious lover to lay on his deathbed a few blocks from your nationally acclaimed ministry and have his simple request for information & consultation ignored and denied?

Forgive my passion & anger Rev. Williams but, after sitting on a deathwatch for the most precious person in my life for three months now --going on four years--frankly, I'm coming a little bit apart at the seams. This is the only person in my life whom I would marry, have married --your ceremonies & blessings notwithstanding-- and I feel like a person deceived EVEN THOUGH I have been forthright with you in telling you that I personally am a non-militant, public & proud atheist.

If you are such an establishmentarian that you can't make a housecall for \$100 for 10 or 15 minutes to explain to two local Hobokenites who have reached out to you why you can't bless their union--because they're not Episcopaleans; because one party is an atheist; because no such ceremony yet exists; because you don't have the time; because you're too busy talking to the establishment press to take the time to counsel two gays who have requested it;--then, please give me some response in writing which I can use for the rest of my life as evidence of your callousness, indifference, timidity & hypocrisy in dealing with two very real gay people, very much committed to one another, who have lived in Hoboken for 14 years and who simply asked to talk to you as to whether you, your Oasis Ministry, your church, etc, was open to them!

I'm no monster. I'm someone dealing with a terminally ill lifemate. Even my atheist friends describe me as a "saint"--an award I'll decline for both its title and its sponsors.

I can only wonder if this letter will get a response. and please, when you call, make sure you speak to me.

Cordially yours,

Randy Wichter

Randy Wichter
David Combs
M.V.P. #1
Hoboken, N.J. 07030

CC: GALA
GAY ATHEISTS OF AMERICA
& in the future= any major news
media I should choose.

1000-12:30
212-2551439 1:30-9:00p.m.

12/26/90

Dear Barbara,

I was particularly delighted to get your card. I hope that whatever changes have come into your life by leaving the paper are all for the best...

It's been a very rocky week but ever since I actually got my Xmas letter done this year, I've been in an absolutely exhuberant & exhilarated mood---hard as that might seem after reading my dashed off mini-tome (ha).

Of course, it could have been alot better. You know the read polishing is in the rewriting--but I'm satisfied, more or less, with my account of the wedding even though it was just thrown onto paper.

My Xmas gift to myself this year is to print 30 copies in color for the first time. George tells me it's crass to keep telling people the color copies cost me \$10 each--so I won't mention it here (ha). But who can put any price tag on a work of art (?) and/or a chapter in one's life.

I had one of the most marvelous Xmas's--certainly the best since that greatest-one-of-all in 1986. So, given the circumstances, I'm really beginning to feel like a "psychic" survivor. Any normal sane person would have been driven mad ages ago.

I'm sending you this, my FIRST mailed copy of my special color letter half-filled with graditude & half-filled with remorse. Graditude to you for giving me the absolute best evening of 1990--the evening I came home, sat down & read your story for the first time. I can honestly say I cannot remember a more exciting or happier moment in my entire life. "Remorse"- for having been so rushed & emotionally involved when I knocked off the first two pages that I failed to list you & your story as one of the unexpected good-samaritan helping-hands which pulled me through it all. For that sippy oversight, I feel oblinded to apologize.

I'm sure you'll enjoy it--because you were really part of it. So curl up for a good read, a few laughs..and keep a hankie handy in case of tears. I'm sure you know I feel the only challenge for a writer is to touch people emotionally--a sentiment you, too, must share since you do it with such style.

Keep in touch. Happy Hannakuh. Forgive misspellings, etc. I need a proofreader. Have a good & happy & healthy & prosperous New Year. The best is yet to come!

As always,
with love,

Sandy Wheeler

P.S.P.S. -

12/26/90

And finally Christmas 1990 was done.
My letter through the presses had run.

Preview copies got reviews quite clear.
Suzanne Phillips was poet of the year!

But my "Happy Holidays" letter couldn't end without good cheer.
Nobody'd appreciate a sad ending this time of year.

Could I still pull chestnuts from the fire?
After all these pages so dire?

I had to go back in time before it was too late.
By golly, I'd creatively correct a great mistake!

Another carbon copy. An extra page or two I'd make.
It'll be a great ending! With joy! Call it an update....

(over)