

A FAMILY FIGHTS AIDS: PART 1

Recalling The Past

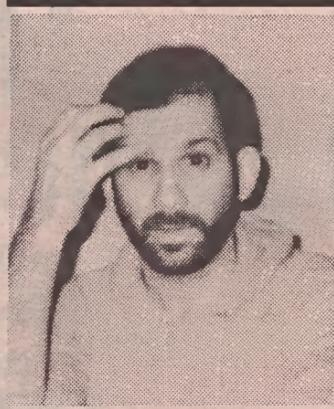
First of three parts.
By **MARK DRUM**
Associate Editor

Flu had had me bedridden. And on this day — this Sunday — I was dragging myself out of the house for the first time in three days to talk to a mother and father whose son is dying of AIDS.

Driving to their home in a town not far from Charlotte, the rain was relentless. With it, a cold wind picked up. The coffee mug warmed my hands as I listened to a Bach concerto on WFAE.

I was apprehensive. What right did I have to intrude on the most sensitive and private things a family experiences? These were not statistics I would talk to. They are people who laugh and love and hurt. Only, they hurt more than I could imagine as they find themselves in a strange world where terms like PCP and bronchoscopies and encephalitis are commonplace.

I had promised to keep their identities confidential. I — and they — hoped



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— Mark Drum

others going through their pain would find the courage to call and talk.

I sat on their living room floor, tape recorder on, pens and pad poised, removed for an afternoon from my hectic life in Charlotte.

As I listened and questioned, I realized that this was more than a story

about tragedy, about AIDS. It's a story of a family, and how families cope. And it's the story of Bobby and how his life against incredible odds brought forth strength and unconditional love.

The names you'll read are not theirs.

Bobby's mother, Mary, lovingly turned the pages of a new photo album,

Editor's Note

In the eight months that I have edited Q-Notes, the series about Bobby that begins with this issue is the finest story we've published. Associate Editor Mark Drum spent hours with this family. The part about coming out and Bobby's parents' reaction could be the same for countless of us. The part about AIDS will touch more and more of us. Mark has given us a series you may want to save to share with family and friends. In March, you'll read about Bobby's life in New York as seen through his parents. In April, you'll read about his life with AIDS and his parents' absolute love and caring for him.

DON KING

positioning recent holiday snapshots one-by-one.

"Aren't they a fine looking group?" she asked.

The portraits looked like any other family's. The girls, Claire and Dot, and boys, Bobby and Sam — adults with arms around each other. Nothing unusual, I thought. Perhaps Bobby looks thin, tired. Still, that could be my imagination, because I knew.

"I always suspected there was something," Mary said. "When Bobby was eight, we took him to a child psychiatrist for recurrent nightmares. He was not a particularly happy child except when he was with the other children in the family. We asked the psychiatrist, 'Is there something about him we should be watching for? Something we should know?' I thought he was very feminine. 'Don't be ridiculous,' he told us. 'There is nothing wrong with this little boy.' Bobby had an interest in skating and we pursued that."

Bobby is 30 years old now. Mary and Bill call him their "special child." His sisters and brother, his mother and father rush to his bedside from time to time in yet another hospital. As mothers and fathers do, Mary and Bill remember the times of childhood. There is safety in the past.

"I was a show biz father," Bill interjected. I could feel this man's pride for his son in his tone of voice and the look of his eyes. It was hard to believe that he had reacted so violently when Bobby first told them he was gay.

"Those are Bobby's medals up there," Mary pointed with pride to the bureau. For years they provided Bobby with the best skating instructors they could afford. He was a gifted child in some respects. But the best of parents could not have been prepared for the rocky road that the years brought.

"We moved here (when Bobby was about 13 years old) and he hated it," Mary said. "By the time he was 15, he was an obnoxious teenager. That's when he told us he was gay."

Neither she nor Bill had thought much about gay people up until then. But memories of brief encounters returned.

Once, a man made advances toward Bill in a subway in New York City. Bill also knew a gay man — "a nice guy," Bill said — who did drag shows in the mountains of New York State. Mary and Bill once were introduced to another transvestite who was gay. Like so many gay people, he had faced family rejection. "My sister is pregnant," the transvestite told them. "I hope she has a boy and that he turns out just like me — gay."

Mary hadn't thought of that in years. Not until Bobby told them he was gay.

"I don't remember the exact conversation (with Bobby). All I remember is me saying, 'Are you trying to tell us something? Are you trying to tell us you're gay?' And he said, 'Well, I'm bisexual.' And I said to myself, bull. The first thing in my mind was, here is this

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