

New York: The Good Life

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second part of a family story. Mary and Bill, who live near Charlotte, have a gay son, Bobby, who lives in New York. He has AIDS. In this installment, they talk about Bobby's life in New York before AIDS. The names used are not theirs.

By **MARK DRUM**
Assistant Editor

Somewhere deep inside us, we have a sense of the world we live in — the essence of where we fit and what is meaningful, of what is right and wrong, what we can and cannot tolerate.

Bobby's story has taught me my most difficult and — ultimately — my most important lesson: There is a time and a place for everything, no matter how painful. AIDS will have a place in history — a place we cannot now comprehend.

I hope that — through this story of Bobby and his family's anguish and love — you will take personal responsibility for your life and the lives of friends. We owe this to future generations of gay people who deserve the chance to enrich the world with their talents — if they live long enough.

Bobby came out to his parents at 15. After more than a year of anger, rebellion and hostility, he moved at age 17 in with his sister Dot in New York City — a

A Family Fights AIDS: Part 2

world he knew nothing about.

For Mary and Bill — his parents — the nest emptied too soon and too completely. That same summer, their daughter Fran married and moved. Fran, they knew, was beginning what promised to be a happy life. Bobby — well, they could do nothing but watch him go and wish him well.

Within weeks, he found friends in the affluent fashion and design world — a world of late nights, drinking and drugs.

"Bobby ate it up," Mary said. "In the process, he nearly destroyed his sister's marriage. He stayed out all night, and Dot and her husband were scared to death for him."

Bobby survived ... and thrived. In less than a month, he was working for an interior design company, had found an apartment and was on his own. He reveled in freedom.

"We had such mixed feelings," Mary

said. "We were joyful — happy not that he was out of our lives but that he (and the fighting) was out of our house. At the same time, we were scared to death."

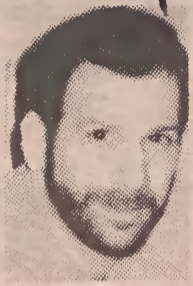
Mary and Bill ached that Bobby had not graduated from high school.

"He was 17 going on 30," Bill said. "I doubt that his new friends really knew how old he was."

"He was 30 academically," Mary said. "Emotionally, he was 17 going on 14. He handled things for about a year and then things got so bad with drugs and drinking that Dot finally called us and said, 'I think you had better do something because I think he is going to hurt himself physically if he doesn't get out of this mess.'"

"We called him. He was spaced out, but agreed to come home on his terms. He asked to go to (a hospital) psychiatric unit for drug treatment. He gave us the impression that he used intravenous drugs. Bill met him at the airport. Arrangements had been made at the hospital."

For the first time in our long



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interview, Mary's voice broke. "It was the hardest day of our lives."

Bill sat by her, silently nodding in agreement, as an unspoken chain of memories bonded them to the past. "We took him in — and there were these huge black doors with a bell to ring to get inside. I looked at Bobby, and then at Bill and rang the bell."

The worry was unnecessary.

"In four days we found out that he was the biggest and best actor you could ever hope to meet," Mary said. "He was not addicted. There was no withdrawal, absolutely none."

And, for the second time, Mary and Bill heard a psychiatrist say, "There is absolutely nothing wrong with this boy." The man advised them to "leave him alone. No restrictions. Have him stay as a border in your home. If you are not going to kick him out, then learn to live with him. Leave him alone for three months to recuperate."

That's what they did. It wasn't easy. They had no support group then as they do now (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). Bobby's determined independence was a constant source of friction.

"The only thing he did to please me was that he kept himself clean," Mary said. "I didn't touch his room and I wouldn't do his laundry. He came and went as he pleased. It made for a very unhappy home life. Sammy (his younger brother) was upset — only four years younger and with restrictions while Bobby had none."

But Bobby began accepting responsibility for his life. He announced one day that he had taken the G.E.D. (high school equivalency exam) and was registered for classes at a local college.

"He seemed happy for a while," Mary reflected. "And he went for one year. It was still difficult. He defied everything and then at the end of a year he was ready to go back to New York City and try and make a go of it and not make the same mistakes. And he went."

"He went to school, too," Bill noted proudly. "He has attended three colleges but never got a degree; it still upsets him."

Mary paused, caught between today and yesterday, trying to sort out her son's life, filled with contradictions. Her voice brightened as she remembered happier times.

"Bobby was a very good looking boy. I know he led a very active homosexual life. He went to all the right places. He always managed to be with upper class New Yorkers and went to the finest restaurants. Then, after two years, he met Frank, who became his lover. They had a beautiful apartment. (Bobby had, by this time, landed a prestigious position marketing American-made equipment in Europe.) He and Frank were together for five years. And then there was Tony. And they were together for four years."


As the story approached the present with its grinding struggle against AIDS, Mary became pensive, talking quietly of how she has come to know and love the men in Bobby's life and to respect Bobby's independence and accomplishments.

"It must have been so hard on him," she said. "Before Frank — and in between Frank and Tony — I know there were many, many people in his life. There is no way to know how he got AIDS, or when."

Last April 9, the call came: Bobby was in a coma.

Mary, Bill and Bobby's sisters rushed to his bedside — the first of many trips to New York. He had meningitis and encephalitis (infections of the spinal cord and brain). He survived with minimal effect — short-term memory loss.

Though not formally diagnosed as an AIDS patient, Mary and Bill for the first time witnessed discrimination against



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