

Civil rights pioneer

Bayard Rustin
page 16



Interview

Jazz artist Dave Koz
page 33



Weddings and Valentine's Day

Tips to having a super time
page 33



QNotes

Noted . Notable . Noteworthy . LGBT News & Views

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Fighting for life

Partners fight to keep their love alive
as one battles leukemia

by David Moore . Q-Notes staff



Wedding in Canada: Wes Thompson (left) and Trey Owen on their wedding day in Canada.

Imagine thinking you have your whole life before you and suddenly you wake up one day to find out that — in all likelihood — you were wrong and you have a lot less time left than you thought.

That description isn't too far off the mark when Trey Owen talks about his battle with leukemia — and his partner's valiant efforts to help him pull through it all, despite the odds.

"I was tired all the time," Owen recalls. "I just thought it was because I was working a lot of overtime. I was working really hard. Eventually my partner Wesley made me go to the doctor and have some blood work done."

Initially, the results led Owen and his partner Wesley Thompson, at the time a physician's assistant at the Jemsek Clinic, to believe that Owen was suffering from Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia.

"The doctor said for a man my age that's probably what it was — nothing too serious that couldn't be managed."

As fate would have it — that was not the case. Owen was ill with Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia, a much more serious type of the disease that normally effects children.

"I had two genetic characteristics that made mine exceptionally virulent," he recalls. "If I had not gone to the doctor I would have died in my sleep — essentially bleeding to death internally."

Fortunately for Owen, doctors recognized the symptoms very quickly and immediately told him to pack a bag and head for the hospital.

Thompson and Owen had been together as a couple 19 years at that point. Like many long-term couples, they'd weathered their shares of ups and downs — but nothing like this.

When they first met in Chapel Hill back in 1986 they had no way of knowing the path that lay ahead — but it wasn't long before they realized they wanted to share the journey together.

"I remember when we first met very clearly. I was a senior in college working as an assistant manager at the Gap," Owen chuckles. These days he's a full-time program manager for IBM. "Wesley came in to buy a pair of black jeans. At the time he was in the physician's assistant program and he was a senior at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill."

Thompson recalls his version of events: "He was there, toiling over paperwork — I thought he was so cute. At first I thought he was scowling, but then he looked up at me and broke into this big smile. I was with a straight friend and we left — but I went right back and asked him out for dinner and drinks. He met me later that night at a restaurant called Another Thyme — and after that I invited him back to my place for wine."

Perhaps it sounds a little cliché — but it is fitting — the rest is history. The two men grew together and continued to make their lives together as the 20th century became the 21st century.

All around them the world was changing. Friends passed away. Political parties gained and lost control of the government. Fashion reinvented itself countless times. Technology continued to expand at an unfathomable rate. TV viewers went from watching "Square Pegs" and "Dynasty" to "Survivor" and "American Idol." The world would be forever changed by the events of Sept. 11, 2001, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 — while a growing movement towards same-sex marriage was being met with resistance from Republicans and evangelical Christians.

There's no question that the world has changed dramatically since Thompson and Owen first met on Nov. 18, 1986.

Despite the tumultuous times,

their relationship endured.

It's true that individuals in a long-term relationship sometimes take each other for granted — no couple is immune to that. But when faced with such a life-threatening illness, it was the bond of their many years spent together that gave Thompson the strength to stand by Owen when the going got really rough.

After Owen was ordered to Charlotte's Presbyterian Hospital, he would spend several weeks there, undergoing the most aggressive kind of chemotherapy available.

"I didn't get sick," Owen recalls. "Which was good. But I had this thing called a PICC line. Actually I had a couple — which later led to me getting infected with e-coli. I got blood poisoning and I was in the ICU for about a week. I died and was revived several times."

Owen confirms that there are long blocks of time during his illness that he has no recollection of.

Thompson, who stayed by his partner's side throughout the ordeal, remembers everything.

"He was very sick. I'm glad he doesn't remember. It wasn't a good time. Emotionally it was quite devastating. They were telling me he's not going to make it — but I just wouldn't give up. We stayed there to be with him 18 hours a

see fighting on 7

Big changes at MCCs across the Carolinas

Charlotte loses a pastor; Winston-Salem gets a new one and SC's Upstate finds another home

Change is clearly on the forefront at multiple Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) across the Carolinas currently, as MCC of the Upstate has relocated and two other Carolina-area churches are facing pastoral changes.



According to Upstate's pastor Rev. Donna Stroud, her congregation just recently made the decision to move to another facility after negotiations to purchase a church built more than a century ago fell through.

"The owner said he had two-and-a-half acres and he had just over one -and-a-half. He

see mcc on 6

Gay jazz genius is finally getting his due

Singer Dianne Reeves talks about Billy Strayhorn and his music

by Peter Galvin

"Billy Strayhorn: Lush Life," a 90-minute documentary film about the pioneering African-American composer, arranger and pianist, debuted nationally as part of PBS's Independent Lens series on Feb. 6.

The film presents Strayhorn's fascinating life as it has never been told before, showcasing his talent and passions, as well as taking a hard look at his complex, 29-year working relationship with legendary bandleader Duke Ellington.

Strayhorn was a 23-year-old piano prodigy when Ellington, recognizing Strayhorn's genius, tapped him to become his chief collaborator in 1940. The partnership produced a

see jazz on 5



Billy Strayhorn collaborated on a body of work that has virtually no rival in originality and range.

UFCC presents 'Words: The Isms'
page 46



AIDS conference in Chapel Hill
page 15