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O B I T U A R I E S

Leonard Matlovich

*If there has to be a disease, and I have to have it,
then this is the disease I want*

BY MIKE HIPPLER

Leonard Matlovich, the former Air Force sergeant who was the first openly gay man to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine, died on June 22 at a friend's home in West Hollywood of AIDS-related illnesses. With him when he died were his parents, a cousin, his roommate, and his best friend, Michael Bedwell. His sister and two nieces had also visited shortly before his death. Matlovich was 44 years old.

The son of an Air Force master sergeant, Matlovich was born in a military hospital in Savannah, Georgia, on July 6, 1943, and raised on a series of Air Force bases around the world. After graduating from high school in England in 1962, he joined the Air Force a year later and spent the next 12 years in the service.

While in the service, Matlovich served three separate tours of duty in Southeast Asia, for which he was highly decorated. For meritorious service performed in Dong Ha, Vietnam, on his first tour of duty, he received a Bronze Star. Four years later, in Da Nang, he stepped on a mine and was awarded a Purple Heart. He also received an Air Force Commendation Medal in 1971.

After leaving Vietnam for good in 1971, Matlovich served as a counselor with the Air Force's Drug and Alcohol Abuse Program. He later became a Race Relations instructor, winning praise from students and supervisors alike for his bold and innovative classroom techniques. It was while teaching race relations that he began to study the problems of other second-class citizens in the United States, including homosexuals. It was then that he also began to explore his own homosexuality, which he had hitherto suppressed.

In 1974, Matlovich met Dr. Frank Kameny, a gay activist who was looking for someone serving in the military with a perfect record to challenge their policy excluding openly gay people. After considerable deliberation, Matlovich agreed to serve as the gay community's test case, and in March 1975 he delivered a letter to his superior officer at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia stating, "I consider myself to be a homosexual and fully qualified for further military service. My almost twelve years of unblemished service supports this position."

Both the military and media response was swift. In May 1975, the Air Force commenced discharge proceedings. That same month, Matlovich's picture appeared on the front page of *The New York Times*. The *Time* magazine cover followed in September. Matlovich quickly became one of the most famous gay people in the United States and, according to journalist Randy Shilts, "the country's first certifiable gay hero." His status did not prevent the Air Force from discharging him, however, after only four days of testimony and argument at administrative hearings.

Matlovich's lawyers appealed the case — a process which took six years. In the meantime, Matlovich toured the country as a spokesperson for gay rights, leading battles against Anita Bryant in Florida in 1977 and John Briggs in California in 1978. He also became heavily involved in politics, often espousing his own rather controversial conservative philosophy. In 1979 he moved from Washington, D.C., where

he had been living since his dismissal from the Air Force, to San Francisco, where he joined the Republican party and ran for city supervisor. He lost that campaign, but this did little to dampen his enthusiasm for public life.

In late 1980, following a court victory ordering his reinstatement in the Air Force, Matlovich agreed to settle out of court with the military for \$160,000. He did this because his case was no longer a constitutional one; instead it revolved around technicalities and therefore had little bearing on the right of other gay people to serve in the Armed Forces.

With the settlement money, Matlovich opened a pizza parlor in Guerneville, California, which he operated from 1981 to 1984. Although he enjoyed the life of a small-town businessman, he was forced to sell the restaurant due to the AIDS crisis and the resultant, if temporary, period of public hysteria. He then returned to San Francisco, where he dedicated his energies to closing the city's bathhouses. For this he was severely criticized.

A few months later, Matlovich was asked by a group of fellow gay conservatives in Washington, D.C., to help form an organization called Concerned Americans for Individual Rights, which would lobby Congress on behalf of gay rights concerns. Unfortunately, the organization was racked by political infighting, so Matlovich left for Europe, where he spent the next year traveling and supervising American teenagers through a U.S. Army summer hire program. He returned to Washington to become involved in that city's efforts to close the baths. When that effort, too, ended in failure, he moved once again back to San Francisco.

Matlovich's concern with AIDS reached an entirely new level when he was diagnosed as having the disease in September 1986. Rather than turn inward, he became more active than ever before. He raised a memorial to gay Vietnam veterans in Washington, D.C.; protested the Reagan administration's lack of response to the AIDS crisis by getting arrested for nonviolent civil disobedience at the White House; established the Never Forget Project, an organization to honor gay historical figures; took part in the National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights; led the boycott against Northwest Airlines for their policy concerning people with AIDS; spoke at the demonstration against the Pope during the Pope's visit to San Francisco; considered running for the state assembly; and demonstrated in support of the AIDS/ARC Vigil in San Francisco. Worn out at last, he moved to West Hollywood in May 1988 to be with a friend for his final months.

Matlovich's final message was, as it had been for years, one of hope and faith. As he told his biographer for the forthcoming story of his life, to be published by Alyson Publications in early 1989, "If there has to be a disease, and if I have to have it, then this is the disease I want, because the good that has come out of it is just incredible. The reality of the situation is that before we meet, the main thing gay people have in common is our sexuality. Yet the AIDS crisis allows us to share far more by bringing us closer together. For this much love, care and compassion to come out of this community because of AIDS proves that we truly are a people of incredible love. We're going to be a better community because of this."