

MURDERED?

Sven Gomez is found dead in his Northwest Portland apartment; police characterize death as 'highly suspicious' by Inga Sorensen

Sven Gomez's smile was captivating; the thick accent of his native Colombia made common phrases flow like poetry.

On March 25, the 42-year-old gay man was found dead in his Northwest Portland apartment, a scant but cozy nest he had described as his "flat."

According to police, Gomez died of asphyxia. Detective Derek Anderson tells *Just Out* the death is "being investigated as though it were a homicide," however, as of press time it had not been officially classified as such. Nonetheless, Anderson says the death is "highly suspicious," and investigators believe Gomez may have been with another person at the time of his death. They want to speak with anyone who had contact with Gomez after March 12.

In June 1997, we shared Gomez's story in our pages.

"I came to the United States to save my life," he told *Just Out*. "I fear what could happen to me if I went back to Colombia."

For the past decade, Gomez, who described himself as an "outspoken gay writer and activist for human rights for gays," lived in the United States. When we spoke with him, he had not returned to Colombia—a place where his parents and sister reside—since moving here.

Gomez said that he believed his "membership in the social group of gays," as well as his public criticism of "the Colombian government's violation of human rights against gays, transvestites, [and] the homeless," would have placed him in jeopardy if he returned to Colombia.

His fears, human rights activists say, were clearly warranted.

According to a 1995 joint report of the Colombian Human Rights Committee, International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, and Project Dignity for Human Rights in Colombia, "it is not uncommon for gay bars to be closed, and patrons are continually harassed by the police and army. Police raids are not unusual.... There have even been mass killings, such as a massacre in a town called Envigado on the outskirts of Medellín on June 6, 1992. Five gay men were taken from a gay bar, El Carriel, and killed by a group of men firing 9-millimeter Uzi submachine guns."

Gomez traced his involvement in gay rights back to 1980 when he was part of a small group of gay men who gathered socially.

"However, when gays started being murdered, eight of us organized ourselves better and founded the Gay Liberation Movement," he said.

Gomez handled public relations for the fledgling group, one of whose activities was to contact *Spartacus*, an international European gay magazine, asking that letters be sent to the Colombian president protesting the murder of gay people.

In late 1986, group members led a march of 50,000 unionists, sex workers, indigenous peo-

ple, farmworkers and others in Bogotá. The march was named *Sí a la vida*, or "Yes to Life," and made its way to the Plaza Bolívar, where the Presidential Palace is located.

According to Gomez, a month later threatening calls began to pour into the home he shared with his sister and parents in Bogotá.

"The first call came in the afternoon," he explained. "I answered the phone and heard sounds and then someone said, 'Ah, you are the head of those faggots that go to the streets asking for rights. We are going to show you what rights you have.'"

Another caller purportedly warned: "Hey faggot. You better watch your ass."

He said later calls threatened death.

Despite the threats, Gomez remained out and active. In March 1987, he said, he became the first openly gay person in Columbia to get tested for HIV—on national television no less. He did it, he said, to encourage others to get tested.

Gomez spent most of his time in 1989 at his mother's farm in Guateque, Boyacá, outside Bogotá, due to continuing threats.

That spring, during a visit to Bogotá, Gomez said he was detained by the National Security Police and had his identity papers confiscated.

Gomez said police often conducted roundups in the gay areas, "physically and verbally abusing the drag queens, kicking their clothing and wigs, and making everyone flee the area without looking back."

On another visit to Bogotá in early 1990, Gomez said, "[I] noticed four or five armed men sitting in a dark-colored Jeep watching my bedroom window. I fled my home by the back door and cut through a neighbor's home to avoid detection by these men."

With little money, Gomez left for Los Angeles. That was June 1990. He gradually made his way north to San Francisco, where he lived for a time before eventually landing in Portland.

"When I came to Portland I had two small boxes of books, a suitcase and I guess about \$17 in my pocket," he recounted.

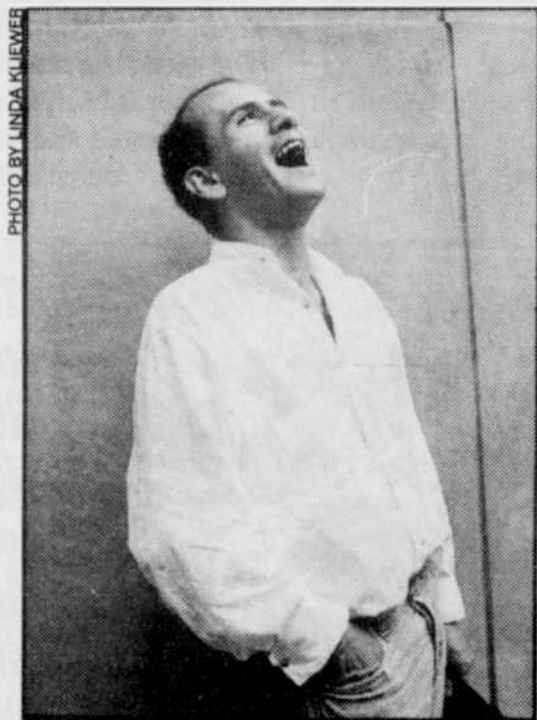
Gomez supported himself through various means, from interpreting to housecleaning to bussing tables. He most recently bussed at Il Fornaio, a trendy bistro a few blocks from his home.

"Sven was terrific. He had many friends in our Il Fornaio fold and lots of our regulars really liked him," says Richard Southwick, an assistant manager at the eatery. "He was lighthearted and had a great sense of humor.... He will be missed."

Gomez also enjoyed assisting those living with HIV/AIDS, and had volunteered for various causes.

"I am trying to enjoy my life, and I know all my life I've had good luck," he said in 1997. "I have to be optimistic."

■ Anyone who had contact with Gomez after March 12 is asked to contact the Portland Police Bureau at 823-0400.



Sven Gomez in 1997

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