

The past 15 months have been most bittersweet for Wayne Kirk. Early last year he finally came out of the closet—to his doctor. His partner of 34 years was sick, and the strain of concealing the true nature of their relationship and trying to provide 24-hour care finally had built to a point where he couldn't hold back anymore.

Sadly, Dan Marks lost his three-year battle with Lou Gehrig's disease last fall. But their long relationship taught Kirk important life lessons about the significance of family and friends—and of being true to yourself.

The couple met in 1967 in Pittsburgh, where Kirk was working as an engineer. Marks, who had grown up in the area, noticed him ice skating at a rink in Monroeville. One day the tall, young man introduced himself: "I'm Dan. You're quite the skater!"

With those simple words and the dinner the two shared afterward, a relationship began that spanned the country and more than three decades—years that saw such seminal events as the 1969 Stonewall riots, the emergence of queer communities all over the world and the AIDS epidemic. The couple created a life together that took them to California and eventually to the Pacific Northwest. Both had engineering backgrounds that led to work in the defense industry of Southern California, a world of high-security clearance and low tolerance for being "different."

It all came to an end last October when Marks died in his sleep at a hospice in Vancouver, Wash. Ironically, the 57-year-old was due to be released the next day. Kirk, who had hardly left his side during the awful progression of his illness, was sleeping in a bed next to him.

Marks' decline in health began with a fall from the back patio at home. At the time it seemed like a freak accident, but a neurologist saw something troubling on an X-ray and recommended surgery to correct a loss of feeling that Marks had developed in his right foot.

When the surgery resulted in absolutely no change, a doctor gave them his diagnosis: Marks had lower motor neuron amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. The rare, progressive and usually fatal neuromuscular illness is better known as Lou Gehrig's disease, named after the great New York ballplayer who died from the condition in 1941.

Initially the couple were hopeful, and Marks refused to accept a grim prognosis. Even at the time of his death, the couple were planning a cross-country trip. However, the disease had spread into the upper extremities, where it can affect the nerves and muscles that control breathing and other vital functions.

The story of Kirk and Marks is of two men living together and being faithful to each

LOVE AND LOYALTY

Lou Gehrig's disease ends 34-year relationship

by Jack Turteltaub



Wayne Kirk volunteers at Hospice Southwest, which offers families an alternative "homelike" environment where loved ones may receive end-of-life care



Daniel Marks (left) and Wayne Kirk celebrate Christmas three years ago

other but also remaining officially in the closet until January 2002, when Kirk finally broke down in his physician's office during a checkup. He marvels that his doctor "spent an hour listening to me," then referred him to a therapist.

Kirk describes being "out" as "the most wonderful feeling of freedom. I'm not afraid anymore if someone should ask."

But why did he and his partner stay in the closet for so long? Kirk and Marks worked as engineers in a defense industry subculture that was more

conservative and security-conscious than the society around them.

When Kirk had a job with a Los Angeles company in the 1970s, he also carried a top security clearance that allowed him to do work in Las Alamos, N.M., where the original atom bomb had been developed in total secrecy during the 1940s. While the couple were not completely isolated from gay culture, they had to be secretive and tactful, especially in

the early years, in a world where any hint of sexual deviance could lead to immediate termination.

Kirk recalls inviting unsuspecting friends to parties at their house: "I remember friends coming over from work and talking about football. They thought Dan and I were relatives or cousins. Nobody ever brought up or discussed our relationship."

Fortunately, as the world opened its mind to queers, workplaces became friendlier, too. Kirk speaks warmly about some of the people at Hewlett-Packard, where Marks was employed when they moved to the Northwest. Not only did the company allow Marks to keep working from home on a contract basis almost until the day of his death, bosses and peers became close and supportive friends.

The importance of family runs like a thread through all of Kirk's conversations. Looking back, he realizes he's been a "people person" all his life, developing many close friendships and trying to have a positive effect on those around him—gay or straight.

Kirk and Marks once helped an abused mother and her six children deal with domestic violence, drugs and abject poverty over a period of years. They helped the family escape from a violent relationship, moving them out of a shack and into a rental property they owned.

Kirk remembers telling the woman, "We can't help you unless you leave your husband." She replied, "He's sleeping right now; can you come and get us?" Kirk and Marks did, and it made quite a difference.

The woman's oldest son, then a teen-ager, lived with the couple for several years, eventually graduating from Evergreen High School. Today he is a married father and a sales representative "who makes more money than I ever did." Kirk proudly notes, "You know, to this day, he calls or visits me every week."

Kirk loves photographs—of all the people important in his life—which he displays in his Vancouver living room. He proudly shares pictures of him and Marks getting married many years ago by a gay Unitarian minister at the Metropolitan Community Church in Long Beach, Calif.

Kirk came from a big family—three sisters and three brothers—and reveals that one of his brothers for years had trouble accepting him because of his sexual orientation and his relationship with Marks. His brother finally visited him a few years ago, and they reconciled.

Kirk will travel back to Pennsylvania next month to bury the same brother, who recently committed suicide because of health problems. He is looking forward to the ceremony and to reuniting with other family members, an event he sees as healing and redemptive.

Kirk learned one of his most important life lessons while volunteering at Hospice Southwest. After retiring in the early '90s because of heart problems, he looked around for other ways he could contribute to society. Having been appalled by the poor treatment his dying mother was subjected to in a nursing home, his eyes were opened to alternative care for the dying. He says that the experience has been profoundly moving and that "I learned how to be more patient with people."

Later this year construction will begin on the first free-standing hospice center in the Southwest Washington area. Kirk hopes to play a role in the building and development of the facility, which is in the planning stages. He says his involvement with the hospice staff has helped him appreciate the profoundly important work they do. ☐

For more information about HOSPICE SOUTHWEST call 360-696-5100.

JACK TURTELTAUB is a psychologist, coach and free-lance writer who may be reached at turtelta@e-z.net.

Dignity in Being You

EQUITY
FOUNDATION
Investing in Dignity

Sebastian is a boy dyke who came out when he was 14. She says the youth and adult advocates at Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center encouraged him to be who she wanted to be.

"SMYRC was the place where I could go try on any identity that I wanted to. They asked me questions and listened non-judgmentally. They taught me to play pool and be around people of all sorts without being afraid."

Equity Foundation supports organizations such as SMYRC that encourage youth to be themselves, whether they're queer or questioning. Your gift to Equity is an investment in dignity.

Founded in 1989 by Oregon's Gay and Lesbian community. www.equityfoundation.org
Ad sponsored by Marvin Salles, Realtor and Susan Nestor, CPA.

PO Box 5696
Portland, OR
97228-5696
503-231-5759

