

Silent night

My college roommate Steve Prokasky stayed in the closet until his late 20s.

We met in 1962. He was a year older, but we wound up rooming together from 1964 until I joined the Peace Corps in 1968. During his college years, Steve chaired the University of Minnesota Homecoming Committee, served as an officer for the Minnesota Student Association, and dove into every possible campus organization. We traveled together for three weeks during the summer of 1964, sleeping one night under a tree in Valley Forge and surviving Hurricane Cleo in Miami Beach. Over the years, we frequently double-dated -- and we stayed in touch during my Peace Corps tour.

But by the time I returned to the Twin Cities in 1970 he was gone.

For more than a decade he'd led a double life. I had no clue what was going on -- and I *lived* with him! He told me years later he once ran into one of our mutual college friends at a leather bar in downtown Minneapolis: They saw each other, but immediately shied away and never mentioned it to each other again -- it was too risky to bring their hidden lives into the open.

Steve moved to the Castro District in San Francisco while I taught English to village boys in India. He came out and found a home, found people who loved him for the man he was, and became a leading gay rights activist. But even that wasn't an easy thing to do in the early 1970s. The 1969 riot by gay men at The Stonewall Inn in Manhattan's West Village had jump-started the modern gay rights movement only a few years before. Steve, being Steve, threw himself into community affairs in San Francisco and eventually wrote a recurring column for the still-thriving *Bay Area Reporter*, "serving the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities since 1971." In 1978 he was one of the initial



members of The San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, the world's first openly gay chorale, and sang at the memorial service for the assassinated Harvey Milk less than a month later. In 1981 he traveled with the Chorus on a national performing tour that included his home town of Minneapolis.

He did return to the Twin Cities on his own for a few days in 1975 and spent an afternoon in my apartment telling me about his life in San Francisco. I still choke up when I remember him describing the man he loved: "Jerr," he laughed delightedly, "I finally found somebody who made me want to put the cap back on the toothpaste tube!"

To my shame, I didn't actively stay in touch. I went on cheering for him, but I didn't understand his world, and I was busy raising a family. But those are just excuses . . .

Despite occasionally thinking I *should* try to see him again, I didn't do so until his older brother Tom called me in 1993.

Steve had AIDS.

A few weeks later we met for dinner in San Francisco. I arrived first, watched him move slowly across the room toward me, gripping the backs of chairs to keep his balance, his body so thin I was shocked.

We talked for two hours. I like to think we were each trying to make up for lost time, but I know it was my fault, not his, that we'd stayed apart for so long.

I have no idea what Steve thought about his chances of surviving, but I knew he'd never stop fighting. *That* much I remembered about my old roommate.

We parted . . . and Steve died November 18, 1993, mourned by so many who loved him. Still mourned by me. What I missed by not knowing him during those lost years -- by *not* loving him -- is impossible to say, but I'm the lesser for it.

Which is one of the reasons I have such an emotional reaction each time I read about another teenager who's summoned the courage to come out and been supported by his parents and other family members, as I did this month when I saw the revised birth announcement Kai Bogert's parents sent to their friends: "A retraction . . . In 1995 we announced the arrival of our sprogget, Elizabeth Anne, as a daughter. He informs us that we were mistaken. Oops! Our bad. We would now like to present, our wonderful son -- Kai Bogert. Loving you is the easiest thing in the world. Tidy your room."

Yes, Steve, we've come a long, long way in the past 50 years. I wish you were here to see it.

And it's one of the reasons my wife and I attended a Christmas concert by the members of a social enterprise two years ago in Dallas . . .

I wrote what follows the next day, then shared it with family members and a few friends . . .

* * * * *

I do not have the skill to fully convey the emotional impact of what happened last night . . . but I'll try . . .

Join us. Linda and I are in one of the finest performing arts centers in the nation during the final moments of a Christmas concert by the Turtle Creek Chorale, a world-renowned gay men's chorus. The auditorium is completely dark except for the spotlight on a tall, gray-haired man in formal dress standing quietly at the front of the stage. Silence abides for a few moments until the first piano strains of "Silent Night, Holy Night" drift across the room -- and the man in the spotlight raises his arms. We expect the members of the chorus to begin singing, but they remain silent -- and we realize the man is performing a poetic interpretation of the song entirely in sign language.

We're spell-bound, the words of the song whispering through our minds.

When he finishes, he turns and steps silently onto a podium, facing the members of the chorus. The piano falls silent, the spotlight widens, and we wait for an a capella version from the singers . . .

Instead, all 140 men begin performing the sign language translation together, without the piano . . . 280 hands and arms waving and fluttering and drawing every one of us into their midst. We can "hear" the music and we are silently singing the words to ourselves -- and I am not the only one in the audience crying.

Once their hands and arms become still, we are all invited to join in for one more verse as the chorus begins to sing aloud -- and as we approach the final words I am suddenly back in my boyhood home by the Christmas tree as my father teaches us the German songs he learned as a child himself . . . and without even knowing how it happens I'm singing with him again in German as the closing words "Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!" ("Sleep in heavenly peace") fall unbidden from my lips and I dissolve once more into tears.

*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,
Alles schläft; einsam wacht
Nur das traute hochheilige Paar.
Holder Knabe im lockigen Haar,
Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!
Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!*

*Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright
'Round yon virgin, mother and child
Holy infant so tender and mild
Sleep in heavenly peace!
Sleep in heavenly peace!*