

# One is a Lonely (and probably inaccurate) Number Gay Alumni and Students of St. Michael's College

BY KEVIN THOMAS ALTHOUSE  
Class of 1972, St. Michael's College

Unfortunately, I'm one of those easily distracted guys who can sometimes sit through a three-hour movie and be absolutely clueless about the main plot — usually because I try to discern a “deeper meaning” to sub-plots that only my fertile-yet-unfocused imagination concocts.

So, it wasn't exactly unusual for me not to have immediately extrapolated something profoundly and personally compelling from an obituary that I read nearly five years ago in SMC's alumni publication Founder's Hall about a 1972 classmate of mine who had died on December 1, 1997 in Boston.

My classmate's obit was a typically worded article about a typical alum's death, or so I thought. Initially, my concern over Michael Ward's death was the sort of self-serving there-but-for-the-grace-of-God-go-I anguish that most of us experience when we first learn about the death of someone familiar. But, as my eyes met the obituary's last sentence, my gut felt as if it'd been pounded sharply by a punch from Muhammed Ali in his prime.

“[Michael] is survived by his partner, his mother and three siblings,” read the last sentence of the obituary.

“Partner”?

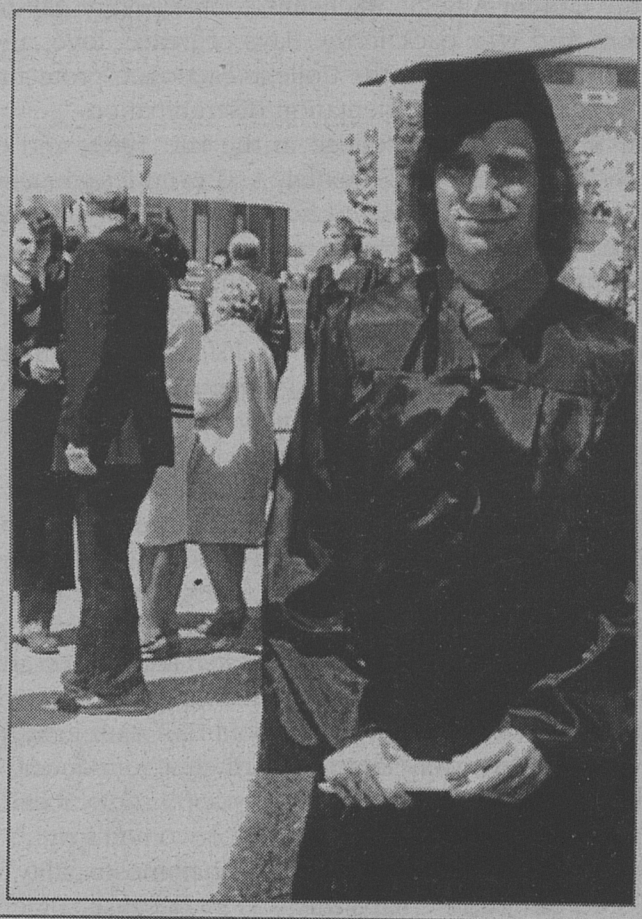
Sure, “partner” can mean many things. In legal parlance, it could be used to identify a participant in a business or corporate venture. But, by contemporary popular culture standards, “partner” relates to something altogether different than garden-variety legal partnerships or businesses, and that's what floored me. After I did a little research, I was pretty certain that my hunch was correct, and that there was a “deeper meaning” about my deceased classmate. And from that deeper meaning, I was fairly certain that there were at least two of us in my class: Mike and me.

Until I read his obit, I didn't really know too much about Michael, especially personal aspects of his life. Given the era, the social and political environment while we were students, probably neither of us had a clue about any “deeper meanings” about each other. At least I didn't.

In retrospect, that's really unsettling because the epiphany I had about the Michael Ward I knew from a generation past made me re-evaluate the statistics I'd heard so much about. After all, two students out of a class of some 340 in my class is roughly one-half of one percent—hardly the ten per cent figure that professor Alfred Kinsey hypothesized more than half a century ago. Simple logic told me that there were more than two of us. There just had to be.

Commencement, May 1972: Maybe the Camera Knew?

Author Kevin Althouse (right front) and Michael Ward (left rear), accepting congratulations from his father at the side of SMC's Joyce Hall moments after commencement exercises for the Class of 1972.



Strangely, it was that rather unique sense of there's-only-two-of-us identity through which I began to develop a belated kinship with my deceased classmate. I must admit that it feels a bit eerie to have bonded with someone after his death. Establishing a relationship is infinitely easier when both parties to that relationship are alive.

Mike and I weren't close friends at Saint Michael's. We were at most friendly strangers, just classmate-acquaintances who lived across the quad from each other, and who occasionally passed and recognized each other with a muted “hey” as we trekked to and from classes, the library, the chapel or Alliot Hall.

Perhaps Mike and I weren't particularly chummy because it didn't seem that we had too much in common. Physically, Mike was shorter than me and had a curly head of hair. I was a taller, skinny kid with straight, longish hair. Mike spoke with a noticeably eastern New England accent and liked Boston Bruins hockey legend Bobby Orr. I had an annoying, nasal central New York accent, and worshiped New York Ranger all-star goalie Ed Giacomin.

[As if by design, the Bruins won the Stanley Cup the year Mike and I graduated. And wouldn't you know it: Mike's hockey hero, Bobby Orr, was named the '72 playoff's MVP. Orr was given the award immediately after the Bruins shut-out (who else?) my New York Rangers and my goalie-hero, Ed Giacomin, in the last game 3 – 0 for a 4 – 2 series Stanley Cup victory.]

Sports teams aside, Mike and I went our separate ways moments after Sen. Ted Kennedy finished his address to the '72 graduates on the steps of Durick library that pleasant May afternoon. Mike soon joined the U. S. Army, and was stationed mainly in Germany as an English-German interpreter.

After leaving the service, Mike returned to the Boston area and worked for the U.S. Labor Department while he attended Suffolk University Law School in the evenings. After he graduated from law school, Mike clerked for a year for a judge, then moved to Washington, D.C. where he worked as an attorney for the Labor Department.

I was a bit more of a gypsy, securing a Master's degree in journalism at Syracuse University immediately after graduating from Saint Michael's; worked as a political reporter at a daily newspaper; then returned to S. U. and its College of Law two years later to get a law degree; did a stint as an administrator of continuing legal education seminars for the New York State Bar Association; taught writing courses for nearly a decade at a Florida university; did another tour of duty with a daily newspaper; taught at several community colleges, and now currently float between the worlds of journalism and academe.

Despite our personal and professional dissimilarities, Mike and I did share some rather obvious affinities: we were about the same age; same gender; both of us had law degrees; we were Roman Catholics, and Mike and I were alumni of Saint Michael's College. Less obvious to most, perhaps all, of our Saint Michael's classmates is the fact that Mike and I were part of a newly emerging — but always present — social minority in the U.S. and on Catholic college campuses across the country: the gay Catholic student.

For many sexual minority students, life at public, non-sectarian colleges or universities can be stressful, despite notions of so-called “political correctness.” But, life for sexual minority students attending Catholic colleges can be extraordinarily difficult, even in an early 21st century “enlightened” culture.

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**Obit**

**Michael Ward**

Michael Ward, 46, formerly of Washington, D.C., died Saturday, November 10, 1996, at New England Deaconess Hospital in Boston as a result of a brain aneurysm, according to his friend Tom Baylow of D.C.

Ward was born April 18, 1950, in Natick, Mass., and grew up in next-door Framingham, Mass. He graduated in 1972 with a degree in history from St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vt. Ward then spent three years in the U.S. Army, stationed mainly in Germany as a German-English interpreter.

After leaving the service, Ward came back to Boston and began working for the U.S. Department of Labor while attending Suffolk University Law School in the evenings. After graduating in 1981, he clerked for a judge in Cincinnati for one year and then came to D.C. as an attorney for the Labor Department. In 1988, partly due to health problems related to HIV and severe diabetes, Ward and his partner, Bob Neftz, moved to Boston to be close to Ward's family. Ward retired from the Labor Department in 1991 for health reasons.

For the last six years, Baylow said, Ward “conducted a gallant fight against heavy odds, despite medical reports of his imminent demise, and went on to live a satisfying life.” Neftz said his partner was “an actuary's nightmare.”

Ward performed pro bono work for Boston's Gay and Lesbian Advocates and

Defenders, enjoyed annual trips to London for theater, and maintained his interest in politics, including volunteering for the 1992 Clinton/Gore campaign. Ward told others that he was delighted to have lived to see U.S. Rep. Robert Dornan (R-Calif.) defeated in the November elections.

Ward is also survived by his mother, Doris A. Mathison Ward, sisters Mary Lou Pyburn and Judith Maguire, and brother George, all of Massachusetts.

A funeral service was Dec. 7 at the Jesus Urban Center in Boston. His remains have been cremated and will be buried in the spring at Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Mass.

Memorial contributions may be made to AIDS Action Committee, 131 Clarendon St., Boston, MA 02116.