

Paying Tribute

The following editorial originally appeared in the Valley News and is reprinted with their permission. (The original story is reprinted on page 8 of this issue).

Under normal circumstances, Monday's story in the *Valley News* about the memorial service for Charles Kurtz would have been the kind that readers often welcome. Yes, it was about a man who died too young. But it was also about his circle of friends coming together and coping with their loss by paying him tribute.

But the circumstances weren't normal. Kurtz died of AIDS. And he was openly homosexual. After the story ran, we received several complaints from readers upset about its tone, content and placement.

The complaints, we fear, highlight a disturbing facet of the country's attitude toward the AIDS epidemic. There seems to be a strong sentiment that certain people who have the HIV virus deserve our sympathy because they are truly "victims." They contracted the disease through blood transfusions or from their parents' blood and therefore shouldn't be held responsible. And then there are those who became ill because they behaved irresponsibly; they had unprotected sex or used drugs intravenously with contaminated needles.

Some of this reflects the widespread prejudice that still exists toward homosexuals. AIDS is still regarded by some as a "gay disease." Some even regard AIDS as a type of punishment for those who live lifestyles that they hold to be immoral or distasteful.

It's naive, perhaps, to hope that people can be exhorted to overcome their prejudice. But one would hope that if ever there was an experience that provided a common ground for all human beings it would be death. A fatal heart attack is not an occasion to criticize a person's fondness for fatty foods; news that a person has lung cancer shouldn't prompt censure for tobacco addiction. Even assuming that a person's homosexuality is ground for opprobrium, which we don't, death from AIDS is not a time to cast judgment. It is a death, and it should be grieved, pure and simple.

The story about Kurtz's memorial service wasn't simply an "AIDS story." It was about a young man who, upon discovering that he had a fatal disease, refused to feel sorry for himself and did what he could to help others confront the disease. It was about a man who faced death with dignity, humor and courage. We believe such stories are intrinsically compelling.

And instructive. The fact of the matter is that the disease is claiming more and more lives. And it is taking the lives of people in the Upper Valley. What's significant about that is not that they are necessarily homosexuals, heterosexuals, drug users, non-drug users, adults or children. It is that they are our friends, neighbors and family. ▼



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