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Face of Heaven

THE FACE OF HEAVEN

KEVIN M. RYAN*

I have nearly forgotten that the institution Peter founded in New York City in 1994, the thriving Lesbian and Gay Youth Project of the Urban Justice Center, nearly wasn't.

When we first met in the spring of 1993, my fellowship permitted me to work with homeless youth at Covenant House near Times Square, and Peter was about to embark on a similar project with gay and lesbian youth at the American Civil Liberties Union, just blocks from my own project base. The potential for collaboration was rich, and we were eager for partnership.

Despite our great expectations, the following fall was disappointing for Peter, and for those of us eager to see him succeed. He found it immensely difficult to build and sustain a direct service project within an organization focused on valuable systems-based reform and impact litigation. He yearned for more contact with young people, for opportunities to defend individual clients. Day by day, his hunger to serve in a more immediate capacity grew, eroding his self-doubt about leaving the Union and pioneering a new enterprise.

Peter cast his net widely in search of a new home, and soon found an eager collaborator in Doug Lasdon, the founder of the Urban Justice Center. In Doug, Peter discovered a beloved friend and mentor, a storied public interest entrepreneur who had managed to house several of New York City's finest public interest advocacy initiatives within his organization by creating a governing structure that emphasized mutual respect, collegial discernment and project autonomy.

When Peter left the Union in 1994 and launched the Lesbian and Gay Youth Project at the Urban Justice Center, the ground was set for

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an innovative, bilateral approach to progressive lawyering. Peter developed a circuit of soup kitchens, drop-in centers and schools where he met his clients. At the same time, he committed himself to active public speaking and tackled the thorniest issues of the day, from welfare reform to mandatory HIV testing of foster children, on television, radio and in the print media. He was, in this moment of his life, as skilled and comfortable in a welfare policy debate with Lawrence Mead on the *Newshour* as he was defending a homeless gay teenager before an administrative board.

Although he was exceptionally intelligent, he had no real capacity to understand injustice. He could not fathom intentional antipathy for the poor and marginalized, and came to diagnose mental illness at every turn. The bureaucrat who forced a 12th grade student to leave school early for a workfare assignment picking up trash in order to receive Food Stamps was “crazy.” The lawmakers who reinstated the death penalty were “insane.” And as for the hundreds of members of Congress who enacted welfare reform in the summer of 1996, Peter convinced many of us there had been a calamitous outbreak of airborne mental collapse in the Capitol.

Much has been made of his beautiful mind, but it was modest company for his heart. He understood this, I believe, and put his intellectual rigor in service of his compassion. Peter saw the power to lift up was stronger than all that holds us down, which enabled him to defy gravity and hold up the sky for many street kids. In our last visit, he took great comfort in the knowledge that the Lesbian and Gay Youth Project would survive him and continue to serve young people. I have thought of those teen-agers since the Saturday morning he died and have found solace in Shakespeare’s words from *Romeo and Juliet*:

When he shall die, take him and cut him out in little stars
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun.

Thousands of street children are sleeping in parks and alleys across America. I hope they look to the sky as it closes upon them and find Peter’s light to keep them safe and hopeful until the dawn.