TELLING IT STRAIGHT

Randy Shilts, the nation's first openly gay reporter, has helped change the face of American journalism.

By K Kaufmann

On the same day he finished writing his book about the AIDS epidemic, *And the Band Played On*, Randy Shilts found out he was HIV-positive. Concerned that questions about his HIV status might overshadow his work, Shilts kept his condition a private matter until earlier this year, when a collapsed lung left him near death. He dictated the epilogue of his most recent book, *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military*, from a hospital bed.

For those who have known Shilts since his days at the University of Oregon, it was no surprise that once he decided to go public with his condition, he was completely open, even granting interviews while he was hooked up to an oxygen tank. And for those who have followed his journalistic career with its series of well-timed articles and books, it was no surprise that *Conduct* hit the nation's bookstores in the midst of this year's heated debate over President Clinton's plans to lift the military's ban on lesbians and gays.

Even as a student, Shilts's openness about his sexuality and his integrity as a reporter were inseparable from his belief in the power of information to effect cultural and political change. Today, this combination of social vision and professional dedication has made him one of the nation's most respected journalists, gay or straight.

In the 1980s, Shilts's coverage of gay issues — specifically the AIDS epidemic — for the San Francisco *Chronicle* was instrumental in bringing these stories, and other gay and lesbian reporters, out of the closet. "When I came to San Francisco in 1975," Shilts recalled in a recent telephone interview, "nobody covered the lesbian and gay community, not the *Chronicle* or the *Examiner*. Now everyone covers it. There has been a dramatic change."

Shilts's books on the lesbian and gay community have been equally influential. *The Mayor of Castro Street*, his 1982 biography of Harvey Milk, San Francisco's first gay supervisor, tracked the emergence of the gay movement from the 1970s. *And the Band Played On*, recently aired as a star-studded Home Box Office movie, remains the definitive work on the politics of the early years of the AIDS epidemic.

Exploring the ignorance and injustice of homophobia has been a constant theme in Shilts's life and work. Born in Davenport, Iowa, in 1951, Shilts was raised in the conservative town of Aurora, Illinois, where, he said, "I grew up never hearing anybody talk about being gay."

Shilts credits his upbringing, however, with exposing him to a range of political views. "People on both ends of the political spectrum tend to dehumanize the people on the other end," he said in a recent *Rolling Stone* interview. "They think they are evil, they are monsters. Having been on both sides let me see that people tend to be motivated by sincere beliefs."

Shilts arrived at the UO in the fall of 1972, after two years of community college in Portland. He had "come out" the previous spring and was already active in what was then called the gay liberation movement. He quickly became president of the UO's Gay People's Alliance and was the first openly gay person to run for student government, campaigning with the slogan, "Come Out for Shilts." He was elected to a seat on the Incidental Fee Committee, where he consistently backed funding for progressive causes and organizations on campus.

The turning point for Shilts came in 1974 when he took his first journalism course, "just to learn grammar." He knew immediately that he had found his vocation, and stayed at the UO an extra year to get his journalism degree.

Shilts is remembered by professors and classmates alike as one of the journalism school's most outstanding students. Mike Thoele, then a reporter at the *Register-Guard*, taught Shilts in his class on interviewing and later was his advisor for an independent study project. "Randy was a person who made waves, but not in an obnoxious sense," Thoele says of his former student. "Through him, people who had never known a gay person and had never thought they could see one as a friend found themselves challenged."

Shilts's ambition, even then, was to cover gay issues for the mainstream press. However, despite his academic achievements — he had been managing editor of the *Emerald* and won more awards than any other journalism student — no paper in the mid-1970s would hire an openly gay reporter.

Moving to San Francisco after graduation, Shilts spent the next six years as a freelance and part-time reporter for newspapers, magazines and television stations, building a solid reputation for coverage of
issues both gay and straight. His big break came in 1981 when he was hired as a reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle just two months after the first story on a mysterious new disease affecting gay men had appeared in the paper’s back pages.

Chronicle science editor David Perlman, who wrote the first story on AIDS, remembers Shilts as “ebullient, eager, hardworking and super enthusiastic about every story he covered.” It was, he said, Shilts’s aggressive reporting in the early days of the epidemic that ultimately made AIDS a front-page story for newspapers across the country.

Dan Rosenheim, the Chronicle’s city editor, also recalls how Shilts was viciously attacked by many in San Francisco’s gay community for his stand in favor of closing the city’s bath houses. “Randy has the courage to call things as he sees them, even when that has meant taking heat,” says Rosenheim. “He pursued his own vision of the truth, and if that meant alienating people who don’t like gays, so be it, and if it meant alienating the gay community, so be it.”

But for Shilts’s vision and persistence, And the Band Played On might never have been written. The book grew out of Shilts’s frustration with the Reagan administration’s slow, at times nonexistent, response to the AIDS epidemic. Over a dozen publishers rejected the project before Michael Denny, Shilts’s editor at St. Martin’s Press, finally convinced the company to provide a small advance for the book. To finance his research, Shilts worked a night shift at the Chronicle and, Denny recalls, at one point in order to pay his bills had to cash in the jar full of small change he kept on his dresser.

While Band won Shilts critical acclaim from the straight press nationwide, its reception in the gay community was more equivocal. There Shilts continues to be attacked for what many see as his discomfort with the more flamboyant and confrontational aspects of gay sexuality and politics. They also wish he were less willing to call the community on its own shortcomings, as he does in Conduct Unbecoming, criticizing lesbian and gay organizations for their long-standing lack of support for gay servicemen and -women.

But the new book — with its brutal revelations of government-condoned witch hunts and persecution of gay men and lesbians in the armed forces — has again put Shilts in the media limelight. Typically unimpressed with all the hype, however, Shilts believes the media are still missing the real story.

“To me, Conduct was never about gays in the military,” he says. “It was an overview of how prejudice works in our society. The whole debate is less about people’s attitudes toward the military than it is about overall social attitudes toward gay people.”

Unfortunately, such attitudes continue to affect perceptions of Shilts and his work. The writer’s openness about his homosexuality, AIDS and past problems with drugs and alcohol — he is a recovering alcoholic — have often obscured the broader significance of his achievements. Indeed, in an age of encroaching tabloid journalism, Shilts, whose books are always exhaustively researched and documented, has become a prominent defender of old-fashioned investigative reporting.

“Randy believes in the ethos of investigative journalism with enormous intensity,” says Denny of St. Martin’s Press. “Originally, I thought he was a little naive to believe he could change the world by bringing the truth to light. Well, it may be idealistic, but it’s necessary. And it’s not naive.”

Equally important is the impact Shilts has had as a role model for other lesbian and gay journalists, says Elaine Herscher, an openly lesbian reporter at the Chronicle. “Randy’s set a certain standard that other gay and lesbian reporters can look to,” she says, “in terms of both doing and fighting at their papers for fair, more accurate and comprehensive coverage of gay and lesbian and gay issues.”

Shilts will undoubtedly continue to have an impact. Despite his illness, he is currently working on additional chapters for the paperback edition of Conduct Unbecoming and is planning to write a weekly political column for the Chronicle.

His vision and dedication as a journalist also remain clear and unchanged. “Anybody who says that they’re objective is delusional,” he says. “We all have points of view on everything. I have a point of view, and it’s clear what that point of view is; but I always try to get the other side and present it accurately and fairly. That’s my responsibility.”

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