

In Memory of Ken Hill

by David Weeda, June 12, 1993

Good afternoon, friends.

I am honored today to share some of my thoughts about our friend Ken Hill.

I imagine each of us here will treasure special memories of the times we spent with Ken.

I know, for me, that Ken's impact on my life will be forever tied into my work in the political process, and of course, specifically in the area of lesbian and gay civil rights.

Some here today may have little knowledge of Ken's valued presence and participation in the ongoing liberation movement of Kansas City's lesbian and gay community.

Throughout most of his political involvement, Ken maintained a degree of subtlety with regard to his sexual orientation. Ken firmly believed that he could not have achieved his successes in the political arena if his comrades, not to mention his opponents, had been placed in a position to acknowledge his gayness. I would agree that his earlier years of politicking occurred during a time when most people--even most good people--were probably relieved that the issue remained comfortably vague or obscured.

But I met Ken just over three years ago. The subject of AIDS had been creeping into our social and political psyches for nine years. A shift had occurred in the mostly haphazard lesbian and gay civil rights movement. Activists were no longer attempting to organize a community to work for mere justice and equality. Nationally, we were mobilizing our communities to fight for our very lives.

Just over three years ago, we in Kansas City were beginning the strategic process which would ultimately lead to the passage of our new, inclusive civil rights ordinance, approved by City Council just nine days ago. Lucky for us, Ken Hill was present at that crucial moment in our history just over three years ago. Lucky for us, Ken Hill had the knowledge and experience to serve as a valued consultant early in this process. Lucky for us, Ken Hill identified his role in this process and he had the courage and desire to realize it. Lucky for us, Ken Hill also had the money, the compassion, and the vision to support this cause at every turn.

Early in 1990, Councilwoman Katheryn Shields asked me if I knew Ken. She suggested that he would be a good resource for both expertise and funding during our first effort to pass the human rights ordinance. At that point, I only knew his name and knew he had made a nice contribution to our Kansas City chapter of ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power. I was thrilled when, a week later, Ken called me on the phone.

The first thing he said to me was "David, my name is Ken Hill and I've been wanting to meet you. I've been reading your writing in the ACT UP newsletter, and I'd like to visit with you about how I might help with your work. Let's have lunch." I met him on the following rainy, Saturday afternoon at Nichol's Lunch, and thus began my involvement with Ken, and his commitment to the work of the Human Rights Project.

Ken truly became my mentor and advocate. He imparted his political wisdom and ideals to me during many walks with that big, lovable dog Charlie. While he was always happy and willing to share his opinion and critique our strategy, he always validated my work and affirmed my self-esteem. As the kindest of friends do, Ken did his best to make me feel proud of the work our community was doing. His contagious smile and exuberance around the subject led me to believe that he, too, was very proud of the work. He made me feel very good, even at some of my lowest points in the process.

Liberation movements cost money. In Kansas City's lesbian and gay community that cold reality was warmed many times through Ken Hill's visionary generosity. Seven of us wanted to attend a National Gay & Lesbian Task Force conference in Minneapolis. Our trip, conference fees and even our meals were paid for by contributions from people who knew their gifts were being matched by an anonymous donor. It was Ken--he had the faith and means to provide that significant funding which resulted in that valuable trip.

When we mounted Jon Barnett's campaign as an openly-gay City Council candidate Ken provided his insight, optimism, and support. I know he was proud of the phenomenal gains our community made with that effort.

When the Human Rights Project incorporated and set up a salary structure for Jon Barnett and me, we had not yet established an ongoing foundation of support. Ken saw our need and provided for our salaries for two full months while we pulled together a monthly donor program.

I certainly don't want to give the impression that it was Ken's generosity which made him an incredible resource for our work. The truth is, he was a constant driving force of ideas and dreams combined with the savvy and networking skills which proved invaluable time and time again.

Governor Mel Carnahan visited at length, as a candidate, with Kansas City's gay and lesbian leaders here in Ken's house. Attorney General Jay Nixon met here also, with the same group, during his campaign.

Ken was responsible numerous times for my attendance at political gatherings where he felt it was important to have someone there visibly wearing a pink triangle pin and talking forthrightly about lesbian and gay issues. Over and over again, Ken would seek me out and pull me over to meet particular individuals and proudly bring up the subject of the Human Rights Project and our work.

I'm so pleased that Ken was able to join us just a few weeks ago in a meeting with Mayor Cleaver regarding the civil rights ordinance. As always, he provided valued input and wisdom to the gathering.

I'm even more pleased that I made a trip over here to visit Ken just a few weeks ago and took that time to tell him what he meant to me. I'm glad I rubbed his feet while he laughed softly and told political stories from his incredible life.

I asked him to retell one of his favorite stories about the time he introduced his mother to Harry Truman. With the tears which only accompany a lovely memory, he squeezed my hand as he quoted the former President: "She's beautiful, Ken. I hope you have her around a long time."

We who knew and loved Ken have had a glimpse of the depth and human warmth which can be so elusive in political spheres.

For me, Ken was a constant reassurance that honesty and ethics could win the day. He taught me that political shrewdness did not necessarily require a cold heart, but depended more upon the skill of communication, the art of understanding, and a tireless commitment to the cause. He encouraged me to always tell the truth, to tell how I felt about it, and not apologize for those feelings.

Karl Cropsey told me that he got to tell Ken about our ordinance. I'm so glad.

My opportunity to know Ken has helped shape my vision of a future which we can create through his legacy of communication, understanding and commitment. I hope each of us will hold lovingly to that legacy in our days ahead, for I think Ken would tell us each to find a cause and live for it--deeply--with love and respect for the democratic process, and the people whom it serves--our friends, families, and neighbors.

Thank you.