

A (Ryan) White Christmas

Within the year, I landed a job as an office assistant at the Judicial Council, the state agency that manages and runs California's courts. My parents were so proud; you'd have thought I'd just been appointed State Supreme Court Justice.

For the first time in my life, I was making decent money. And I spent it almost as quickly as I earned it – mostly on clothes. It was *still* the 1980s, after all.

I also bought a plane ticket home for the holidays, so I could keep my promise to Mom.

Mom had come a long way in the year I was gone. And we owe it all to a heroic kid I've never met named Ryan White. Maybe you've heard of him.

Back in December 1984 – the very month Neal and I fled Kokomo – Ryan, a 13-year-old hemophiliac living in Kokomo, was diagnosed with AIDS, which he'd contracted from a blood transfusion. When he tried to return to school, local parents reacted with bat-shit hysteria.

But not Mom.

Late one night, during my first holiday trip home, Mom and I sipped Baileys in front of the fireplace as she caught me up on family news.

Remember that aunt who feared my blood would be on her hands if I moved to San Francisco? Her kids attended the same school as Ryan White, so naturally she'd joined the fight to have Ryan thrown out of school.

Mom was outraged.

Mom said she'd watched *An Early Frost*, the 1985 TV movie starring Aiden Quinn, which has the distinction of being the first about AIDS. One scene in particular hit Mom hard – one in which Aiden's sister restrains her children from hugging their HIV-positive gay uncle.

“I’ll tell you one thing! If your sister ever pulled that stunt with your nieces...!”

We stayed up until 3 a.m. – talking about Ryan, the horror of AIDS, her fear I might catch it, the challenge facing the gay community and how it was fighting back. I reassured her I was as careful as it was possible to be.

She asked questions. I answered as honestly as I could, using language she could handle.

She was sorry Neal and I had broken up, but confessed she’d never trusted him in the first place. I reassured her that our break-up was still rock solid.

It was the first of many late-night intimate conversations Mom and I would have whenever I flew home to visit. And the beginning of an honest, continuing open dialogue. The more she learned, the less she feared.¹ It took her a while, but I was and still am very proud of Mom and how far she’s come out of her comfort zone.

Ryan passed way in 1990. He was 19.

The right-wing hysteria over Ryan generated headlines. The flip side of the story is rarely discussed. I *know* he must’ve had the same influence on many parents. I’m sure there were many groundbreaking late-night conversations between gay kids and their parents that Christmas.

I now have the mother/son relationship I’ve always dreamed of.

Thank you, Ryan.

¹ If only conservative Americans could learn this trick!