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Eric Rofes, Teacher, Gay Rights Activist; at 51

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BY BRYAN MARQUARD, GLOBE STAFF

Within a few years of marching in a Boston gay pride parade in the 1970s with a bag over his head to hide his identity and protect his teaching job, Eric Rofes had become a political organizer and an outspoken author who repeatedly challenged the conventional wisdom about gay male sexuality.

As he chronicled and helped define the tumultuous changes of the past few decades, Dr. Rofes worked steadily to build and nourish friendships. He did so with an enthusiasm shown by few people let alone by an activist who was trying to forge political alliances among the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities. And straights.

"Eric was really an artist of friendship, I would say," said Richard Burns, who worked with Dr. Rofes at Boston's Gay Community News in the 1970s. "He was a great friend. He put a lot of effort and thought into the rituals and structure of friendship. He would pay attention to anniversaries and birthdays the silly little things."

Dr. Rofes, who helped found the Boston Lesbian and Gay Political Alliance in

1982 and went on to lead organizations in Los Angeles and San Francisco, died of a heart attack Monday in Provincetown. He was 51. He had been taking time away from his home in the Castro district of San Francisco to work on a couple of books.

"Eric, for 30 years, was always out there, always reminding us what our movement is really about a movement about liberation, not assimilation," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in Washington. "And he reminded us that we need to be proud of the sex we have, and to take joy in it."

A lively writer who often delighted in being provocative, Dr. Rofes argued that gay men have been trapped by a pathology that became fused to the community's sexuality in the age of AIDS. In previous decades, homophobia had defined homosexuals as sick members of society, and AIDS had made gays a sick population again this time medically.

"By 1993, it became clear to many of us that one of the most pernicious consequences of AIDS was the way it re-pathologized homosexuality, particularly male homosexuality," he wrote in an article published last fall in the White Crane Journal. "And the most painful part of this return to gay-men-as-diseased-pariahs was that gay men were the most prominent mouthpieces espousing these beliefs."

Drawing criticism from many, Dr. Rofes was one of the first to declare that the AIDS crisis was over in 1994, before the advent of many current drugs used to treat HIV. In the years since then he had been a prominent voice in the gay men's health movement, which views AIDS within the context of responding to the spectrum of physical and mental healthcare needs in the community.

"He kept the flame of sexual freedom and liberation alive during our darkest times," **Foreman** said. "He was a huge national presence. To those of us on the progressive side of the moment, it's really hard to think of going forward without him."

Dr. Rofes was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., and grew up in Commack, on Long Island. In 1972, he arrived in Boston as a Harvard freshman, closeted and dating women.

While teaching sixth-graders at a private school in the suburbs, he marched in Boston's gay pride parade wearing a

paper bag with the hand-lettered inscription, "Jack and Jill can come out, but their teachers can't," said Amy Hoffman of Jamaica Plain, a friend who succeeded Dr. Rofes in a feature editing job at Gay Community News.

"Even at that time Eric was an incredibly intelligent, dynamic person who had a million different projects going on in his life," she said.

He was fired from a teaching job for being gay, then taught for several years at the Fayerweather Street School in Cambridge, where he collaborated with his pupils on "The Kids' Book of Divorce." That collaboration with the children was followed by two other books on parents and on death and dying.

Among his other books were "I Thought People Like That Killed Themselves," about suicide among lesbians and gays, and "Dry Bones Breathe: Gay Men Creating Post-AIDS Identities and Cultures."

Dr. Rofes helped organize the first gay rights march on Washington, D.C., in 1979, and was part of what became known as the "Boston Mafia" members of the city's gay and lesbian community who went on to play significant roles in organizations elsewhere in the country. He served as executive director at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center and at the Shanti Project in San Francisco.

Later, he enrolled in the graduate program in education and social and cultural studies at the University of California at Berkeley, receiving a master's degree in 1995 and a doctorate three years later. Most recently he was a tenured assistant professor of education at Humboldt State University in Arcata, Calif.

While visiting Provincetown one Labor Day weekend nearly two decades ago, Dr. Rofes met Crispin Hollings.

"We picked each other up," Hollings said. "I told him, 'I'm not looking for a relationship,' and he said, 'Well, here's my number, anyway.'"

The two ran into each other again that weekend and found they had much in common.

"We just shared a great love for queer liberation, and I really liked that,"

Hollings said. "And he was really sexy."

He added, "Eric was really all about pleasure being part of our democracy . . . that people were free to enjoy sexual pleasure without the government getting in our way."

They were a couple for 16 years, marrying on Valentine's Day in San Francisco two years ago a legal bond that was later invalidated when a California court ruled against the mayor's decision to let same-sex couples marry.

In 2002, Dr. Rofes had lashed out at political foot-dragging on the gay marriage issue, writing: "We're not content with heterosexuals enjoying state-sanctioned marriage while same-sex couples grovel for a watered-down imitation domestic partnership." He added later, "It may be time for queers to stop letting heterosexuals off the hook!"

Behind the strong stance, though, was someone "very committed to reaching out to all sorts of people," Hoffman said.

She last saw him recently at a dinner with friends who were debating "whether it was possible to be friends with a Republican. Eric said it was. He would have friendships and sexual relationships with people who had radically different politics than him."

"Always, Eric was a writer and an activist and a critical thinker," said Burns, who is executive director of New York City's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center. "He was a natural teacher, a natural mentor."

"In addition to Hollings, Dr. Rofes leaves his mother, Paula Rofes-Casey of Boynton Beach, Fla., and his brother, Peter, of Milwaukee.

A memorial service will be held July 15 at 3 p.m. in Metropolitan Community Church in San Francisco.