



# Leonard Matlovich: 'An Average Joe who just happened to be gay'

Michael Bedwell had grown up in Sullivan County, but moved to Bloomington when he could, because despite the lack of communications tools like the Internet in the 1970s, everyone knew that was the best place to live in Indiana if you were a gay man.

Leonard Matlovich had served with distinction in the United States Air Force. But on Oct. 22, 1975, he was discharged because he had informed his commanders he was gay.

Nine days after his discharge, on Oct. 31 of that year, Matlovich came to Bloomington, where he and Bedwell met. Matlovich was one of the featured speakers in the second annual Gay Awareness Conference at Indiana University.

The two remained good friends over the next 13 years, living in Washington, D.C., and San Francisco, until Matlovich died of complications from AIDS on June 22, 1988.

Bedwell has returned to Bloomington to live, and Thursday, on the 40th anniversary of Matlovich's discharge from the Air Force, he will be one of the speakers at an event on the IU campus to remember the man who became one of the most important figures in the gay rights movement in the 1970s and 1980s. The program will begin at 5:30 p.m. in the Lincoln Room of the Lilly Library.

Matlovich didn't fit the national stereotype of gay men. The Air Force sergeant had served three tours of duty in Vietnam and had a spotless service record. He received the Bronze Star, given for heroic achievement, heroic service, meritorious achievement or meritorious service in a combat zone. He received the Purple Heart, which is awarded in the name of the president to those wounded or killed while serving. Time Magazine ran a photo of him lying in a Danang hospital after he stepped on a landmine. He was covered in bloodied bandages, as he held out his Purple Heart for the photographer.

Still, the military decided he was unfit to serve. And on Oct. 31, he was out of the Air Force and in Bloomington for the conference.

"This is not my fight, it is our fight," he told an audience in Alumni Hall at the Indiana Memorial Union, according to coverage from the Indiana Daily Student. "Future generations of gays when growing up will look at you and know they can become good, healthy, gay individuals."

Bedwell said Matlovich loved his only visit to Bloomington, impressed by seeing 500 people come out to hear what he had to say and further impressed by the fact that IU administrators embraced the conference. He also liked smaller communities and rural areas, and had spent a lot of time in them growing up in a military family.

"He was an Average Joe who just happened to be gay," Bedwell said.

Though he'd already been on the cover of Time magazine and interviewed on CBS by Walter Cronkite when he visited

Bloomington, his public profile continued to rise. He was named one of People magazine's "25 Most Intriguing People of 1975" and appeared in prominent newspapers and on all the network news programs. He fought the Air Force in court for five years, and in 1980, a judge ordered him reinstated, saying the Air Force failed to prove a case that he didn't qualify for service. He soon left the Air Force with an honorable discharge.

In 1986, he was diagnosed with AIDS, which he revealed in May 1987 on ABC's "Good Morning America." A year later, a few weeks before he died, he spoke in California about his life's work.

"Ours is more than an American dream," he said, "it's a universal dream. Because in South Africa we're black and white; in Northern Ireland we're Protestants and Catholics; in Israel we're Jewish and Muslim, and our mission is to reach out and tell people to love, not hate."

Bedwell said he suspects Matlovich knew that would be his last public speech.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, who was in Bloomington the same day I interviewed Bedwell, referenced Matlovich, though not by name, when he explained why a few years ago as a member of the U.S. Senate he voted to do away with "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and open up the military regardless of sexual orientation.

"The most eloquent and most convincing testimony against the policy of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, comes, as such testimony usually does, from those who have paid the highest price for the policy's failings. And the most compelling I have ever read is on a tombstone in Congressional Cemetery."

Leonard Matlovich is buried under the stone, though the tombstone is carved simply with "A Gay Vietnam Veteran." It also has this epitaph:

"When I was in the military they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one."



**Bob Zaltsberg**

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