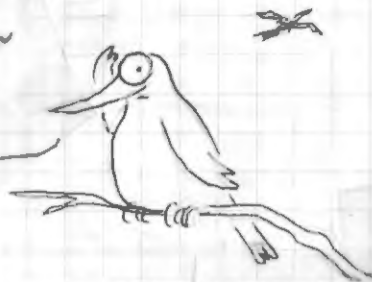


THE EMPTY NEST NEWSLETTER

VOL VI NO 3 DECEMBER 19'92

"Be like the bird, who/Halting in his flight/On limb too slight/Feels it give way beneath him,/Yet sings/Knowing he hath wings:" ... Victor Hugo

*"And singing still
dost soar, even
and soaring, over
himself."*



REMEMBERING JOHN

Remembering John: He came home to find love, and to teach us



John Ryan Lewis

by Sandra Olivetti Martin

John Ryan Lewis has come home for good.

You might have noticed John in central Illinois in the nineties. You might have seen him in the Dairy Queen in Gillespie, or in Memorial Medical Center, or in the newspaper. He might have been the closest you came to a guy with AIDS.

You might have known John if you were in Springfield in the seventies. He might have been your classmate in City Day School or your neighbor on Fifth Street. You might have seen him dancing at Baur's, lunching at Maldaner's, listening to jazz at the St. Nick. Or you might have met him at Sangamon State University, in its heady days, in such classes as "Male Oppression: Alienation, Liberation" or "The Cultural Impact of Jazz and Blues" or "Motion."

He was the guy you knew was gay. He flaunted himself, with starry eyes and the first straight-legged jeans in the bell-bottom era. If you were his friend, his playful gaiety was a refreshing contrast to Springfield's painful straightness. If he could survive on the prairie, you certainly could—your "queerness" being nowhere near so taboo as his.

Or you might have been his enemy, hating him for his gayness as you saw him sashaying down the street.

Whatever you thought, central Illinois was John's home. He was born

and bred in Gillespie—as were his brothers and sister, mother and father, aunt, cousins, grandparents, and great-grandparents. He was schooled in Springfield and Champaign-Urbana. Whatever you thought of him, he was ours. He was rooted in the black soil, he thrived on Taylor's chilli and A & W root beer, he was brought up on our local legends and landmarks—from Abe Lincoln to the mines, stills, and murders of Macoupin County. Even after his expatriation and cultural resettlement in New York, there was a part of himself he had to come home every now and again to find.

But he was drawn to New York like a moth to a candle.

"I am one of thousands," he wrote. "It is one of the historical truths of gay culture that every year, every week, every day, young gay men and women leave their homes and migrate to the cities. They are looking for a place where they can live without prejudice, without fear, and with equal opportunity."

Without prejudice and with equal opportunity, John made his name in New York, parlaying his Sangamon State training in communications and technology into a standard-setting career in the emerging art of desktop publishing.

In New York, too, he found his culture. He found boyfriends and passions—longing, lust, and disappointment. He found art and culture—all

night jazz and scat singing, nonstop movies, Broadway plays, raucous plays with deep veins of comedy and tragedy. He found involving and creative work. John rounded all the bases of everyday life, only his ballpark was gay.

Rich as New York life was for John in the early eighties, he craved visitors from home because he wanted to share his life with his friends and family. He wanted us to know that culture and sex are inseparable: if we admired his gaiety, we must accept his sexuality.

John lived in New York without fear, even when his culture turned dead serious, ravaged by AIDS. He followed the path of death with many friends, embracing their spirits and tending their withering bodies. He said he was learning new steps in the art of life.

In 1990, John's turn came. "What I originally thought was a bout of flu turned out instead to be a very serious infection," he wrote. "I came back into consciousness forty pounds lighter and with a renewed appreciation for the basic things: being able to breathe, eat, drink, and talk. I would stay in the hospital for two months."

And so he returned home to die.

But first he would live. Recovering at home from the opportunistic illness that diagnosed his AIDS, he regained his Illinois footing. He planned, germinated, and planted a garden of sunny perennials and herbs; they flourished and in their second summer, his last, they came back to him on their own. He took over the family kitchen. He played piano and his Macintosh. He shot pictures and rediscovered dimensionality with the stereoscope. He resumed Gillespie citizenship. He got his driver's license. He consulted with the local paper and taught Macintosh applications at Southern Illinois University Medical School. He activated a central Illinois AIDS network and published a newsletter, *Positive Downstate*. He testified for the Illinois AIDS Advisory Committee to the State Legislature.

This is what John said:

"I've had the pleasures of rediscovering this place. I'd forgotten about the discreet—but in its own way magnificent—beauty of the Midwest. I'd forgotten, too, about the nature of our people here in Illinois, especially in small-town Illinois: caring, down-to-earth, friendly and practical people. And I'm happy to be reminded that these are my people.

Gillespie, IL John Lewis died on Oct 11; this article by Sandy Martin was published in the Illinois Times Oct 15, w/ a front-page headline. It gives only a partial picture of John, however, who was Megan's closest friend. They had known each other since they were 15 and 14, and had been roommates at the U. of Illinois. They were never out of touch, out of sympathy, out of love. Megan needs to write a fuller picture of John, but she says she can't, at least yet. It would be like writing about herself.

John visited at the Lake, and was the keenest, meanest Scrabble player I ever was skunked by. My close friend Marian Levin Knowl loved John -- she had him in her SSU Movement classes the year before I started being in the classes. So I knew John through Marian, through Megan, and finally, when he came back to Illinois, through myself; talking & laughing, sometimes crying, in his hospital room, in his parents' home. He was well enough to fly out to Megan's wedding, March '91, made a huge salad for the reception, and was wonderful fun and good cheer. I'll try to re-

(both columns cont on next page)

JOHN article, cont.

I've realized that this is where I belong, and that no matter how many other places I might live or travel to, I can always come back to this very special place—my home.

"I came back to Illinois because I needed care. I couldn't walk. I weighed forty pounds less than you see me now. I had been gravely ill and I needed careful medical attention. Just as important, I needed the love and support of my family and friends.... So I've come home. And I'm happy to say I'm now flourishing.

"I'm telling you this not because I think you should be interested in my story for its own sake, but because it is so typical.... With the deepening devastation of the AIDS crisis, thousands of gay people living with HIV-related illnesses are returning to rural America, returning to their homes....

"I am advocating family values. Values that say protect the health of your children, your sons, your brothers... See that your families—and all

the members of your families—have a chance at the very best possible lives.

"Educate our young people. This is a preventable illness. Teenagers, especially our gay youth, and all of our people must have clear, concise, and detailed information to help them stop the spread of this disease. Explicit, straightforward education about safe sex is not obscene. Needless suffering is obscene. Preventable death is obscene. Misplaced moral outrage and homophobia are not only unjust—they are lethal.

"When you think about the AIDS crisis, no longer think of it as solely a big-city phenomenon. Over the next years, many people like myself will return home. Don't forget us and don't forget our youth."

John Ryan Lewis, thirty-eight, died at home in Gillespie, Illinois, surrounded by love, on Sunday, October 11, 1992.

Sandra Olivetti Martin is a former arts writer for Illinois Times.

JJ's article, cont

produce a photo of that event here; Megan's not fond of the one that was in the paper and I have no other. I sent my own letter to the Illinois Times!

An extraordinary gift

To the editor:

Thank you for printing, and Sandra Olivetti Martin for writing, the tribute to John Ryan Lewis in the October 15 Illinois Times [See "Remembering John: He came home to find love, and to teach us"]. There are two things I'd like to add to Sandy's words.

The first is that John had nongay as well as gay friends who loved him deeply, and the love was reciprocal. My daughter flew from California so that John could meet her baby, and as importantly, so that little Mark Ryan would know, someday, that he'd been held by John. She said to me that a person is lucky to have a friend like John once or twice in a lifetime.

The other is the effect a visit with John had on each of us. One side of the coin was, of course, heartbreaking, but the other! We laughed a lot, we talked non-stop, and topics ranged through art and music and film and family and politics and his doctors and AIDS and death—but arching over all, life. John viewed his dying as his last great adventure; he intended it to be the creative experience of his life. He

regretted (matter-of-factly) what a tyrant the disease had made him, as he lay in his bed while everyone danced to his—and the disease's—tune. He joked about getting his absentee ballot in, and whether it would be counted if he died before the election. A visit with John was a treat. One came away feeling uplifted, gladdened with life. It was an extraordinary gift, from an extraordinary man.

Jacqueline Jackson Springfield

John shared an issue of his POSITIVE DOWNSTATE news letter that had been dedicated to him; my copy is mislaid but I'll get another one for future publication here. He was the livewire inspiration for the area AIDS support group. Sandy's article doesn't say that in NYC he was one of the first producers of safe-sex films for gays. When John decided to quit eating, he said to me that he felt like a prisoner set free: "My heart is so glad that I'm able to do this. I've already had 2 or 3 bonus years." He said he didn't have an ounce of sadness, "I'm so glad to have



I'VE BEEN MANIPULATED! MY NATURAL ARTISTIC TALENT HAS BEEN USED AGAINST MY WILL TO CREATE SOME CORPORATE ENTITY'S CRUDE IDEA OF WATERFOWL! IT'S OUTRAGEOUS!

ANOTHER BLOW TO CREATIVE INTEGRITY.

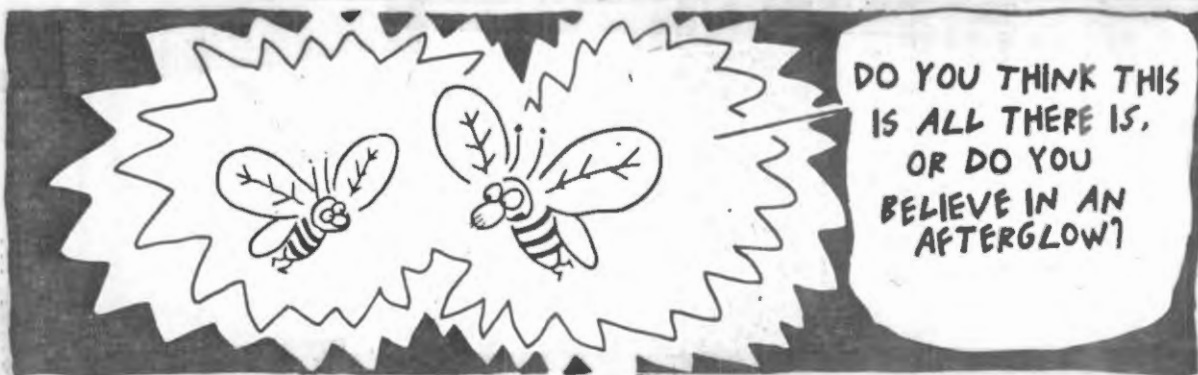
FROM NOW ON, I'LL CONNECT THE DOTS MY OWN WAY.



the ability to experience all the love around me, the care... I'm doing fine." (That was June, when his body refused to die, I think he took up intravenous nourishment again, after a month or so.) John was a great appreciator: going blind, going deaf, ^{yet} appreciated. I appreciate that he openly and warmly appreciated ME. We all are missing him.



John making a salad in Megan's kitchen, March 1991, at her wedding.



Yes- definitely!