

One of my closest friends and a longtime comrade, Ronald Louw, has died. Two major AIDS related factors caused his death: HIV denial and undiagnosed TB. Denial meant that he did not test for HIV until almost too late. And unreliable TB diagnostics developed more than 100 years ago meant that as his immune system was destroyed by HIV, TB could not be detected in his body until it was too late. He vomited, soiled his linen and his health did not improve. Sadly, he was not treated presumptively for TB until four weeks after his admission to hospital. His TB diagnosis was confirmed by a lung biopsy only three days before his death.

Early this year as his sabbatical started, Ronald learnt that his mother Doreen had cancer. Together with his siblings they took turns to travel from Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg to look after their mother in Port Elizabeth. The experience was traumatic for all of them. As she lay in a coma on 16 May 2005, Ronald collapsed and was admitted to hospital with AIDS. Until that day, he did not know that he had HIV. His mother died on that day but she had a full life. He could not attend her funeral a few days later because at nearly half her age Ronald was fighting for his own life.

Without any hesitation, Ronald immediately told friends, family, colleagues and strangers that he had AIDS and sought medical care. He was privileged. He had never gone hungry. He occasionally drank a glass of wine but had never done drugs. He was a workaholic. Smart, educated and surrounded by friends who understand HIV/AIDS, even Ronald failed to get tested early.

In early May with advanced AIDS and a CD4 count under a hundred, all of us hoped that he would recover. Maybe his antiretroviral medicines would work. But they did not because his TB was treated much too late. Although surrounded by countless friends, family and well-wishers, AIDS removes dignity and autonomy.

Ronald had been exemplary in almost all aspects of his life except the fact that he did not get tested for HIV. We all hoped that when he got better, Ronald would himself explain this to all of us. His life shows that none of us are exempt from HIV infection and denial.

I remember the Saturday afternoon drizzle in Mowbray, Cape Town that day in June 1981 when I met Ronald Louw. We attended an African Studies seminar run by Neville Alexander. Anne Mayne, Farid Essack and Shamil Jeppe were also class mates but it is only with Ronald that I established the firmest bond of friendship that endured – endurance on his part, fullest enjoyment on mine.

Friendship has been the most remarkable part of my life. I have great friends and Ronald's illness and death allows me to reflect what friendship means. Friendship means laughter, conscience, engagement with life – politics, philosophy, activism, romantic dreams and disasters, family issues, generosity

and personal pain. Without friends, I would not have survived childhood, a different sexual orientation, political activism and HIV/AIDS. I would not have been educated but for my friends. Ronald was a friend in every one of the senses mentioned above. I can only hope my friendship meant as much to him.

Ronald was a law lecturer and became an associate professor of law at University of KwaZulu Natal but he was irritated at the sign in his hospital room that identified him as a professor. Back in 1981 he was employed as a teacher at Livingstone Senior Secondary School in Cape Town. Ronald joined the Factreton Youth Movement (FaYM) the nemesis of Trevor Manuel and Lionel October and he was actively involved in struggles to lower rents, food prices and debates on the nature of a post-apartheid South Africa. He was a “workerist” and I was an ANC hack.

Over the years, Ronald has also been active as an anti-militarist. He refused to serve in the apartheid military. Central to all his activism was a commitment to equality. This is evidenced by his legal work. He joined the law firm of Justice Joe Ebrahim in Athlone to complete his articles and his continued involvement in human rights work—particularly in the areas of lesbian and gay equality, prisoner rights, criminal justice reform and HIV/AIDS prevention, support and treatment work.

In December 1994, when the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE) was formed, Ronald Louw represented the Sexual Orientation Forum at the University of Natal Durban. Ronald played a central role in the formulation of its principles, strategies and tactics. Ronald Louw together with Nonhlanhla Mkhize, Vasu Reddy, the late McDivitt Hove and other activists were responsible for the creation of the KwaZulu-Natal Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality. Today, they work in the Durban Lesbian and Gay Community and Health Centre.

Ronald Louw was also the consummate committee person. He was faultlessly fair and though he promoted consensus as the best solution—it was always done on the basis of principle.

He was also pedantic and pessimistic. But, these were important qualities to ensure that neither people nor institutions were given false expectations. He always made up for this with a sense of humour – I remember when he taught at the Wittebome School for the Deaf, he told his friends how impressed he was with his own abilities to teach children whose hearing was impaired until he discovered that every time he entered the class they turned off their hearing aids.

He was a remarkable teacher. Loved by most of his students and as the Proctor of the University of KwaZulu Natal, many of students he prosecuted often turned to him for advice because of his sense of justice and fairness.

Despite legendary parsimony, his generosity has made him a great friend and comrade over the last seven years. Since the early days of TAC, I have stayed in Ronald's Queensborough house whenever I was in Durban for work (his more snobbish colleagues hated traveling to a former white working class area). TAC has never had to pay a cent of accommodation expenses and very rarely local transport costs for my work in KwaZulu-Natal. Ronald always carried the cost and the burden of cups of tea, Marie biscuits, disruptive phone calls, an untidy bedroom, my ill-health and much more. Ronald was also the first treasurer of TAC in KwaZulu-Natal but work pressures and his commitment to the Durban Lesbian and Gay Community and Health Centre meant he became a passive TAC supporter.

I originally wrote this article (with Ronald's permission) to ask him to fight to live longer. He is now dead. He died because he did not get tested early. And, when he discovered his HIV status, his lungs and immune system were destroyed. I also write to ask every person to get tested. If you are HIV negative, practice safer sex and stay negative. If you have HIV, live positively and openly – eat well, reduce stress, exercise, practice safer sex and get treated immediately for any infections. When you need it, start antiretroviral treatment.

As he lay dying, Ronald was surrounded by friends, colleagues and family who loved him – Vasu Reddy, Nonhlanhla Mkhize, Alan Rycroft, Judy Parker, Libby Morris, Jonathan Berger, Nathan Geffen, Jack Lewis and others too many to mention. His siblings Patricia Leaver, Alan and Deon Louw gave their love and support.

Ronald's memory demands that we intensify the struggle to get new, accurate diagnostics for TB. It demands that we mobilize to ensure that everyone gets tested for HIV to prevent and treat the illness. His death together with hundreds of thousands of others in our country demands that personal, cultural, scientific and political denial is ended. Above all it requires that we reaffirm the struggle for freedom, equality, dignity and social justice.

A memorial service will be held in Durban on 18 July for Ronal Hayward Louw.

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