

S A N F R A N C I S C O

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◆ Mike Salinas, 1957-2003

Gay activist-journalist dies

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Mike Salinas, a former hard-charging Bay Area Reporter writer and editor who was a central player in many of the San Francisco gay community's great controversies of the 1990s, died Tuesday in New York City. He was 46.

Police ruled the death an accidental heroin overdose, but a preliminary coroner's report suggests he may have died of a heart attack, family members said. His partner, Brian Carmichael, found him at 7:30 in the morning at his apartment on East 28th Street, curled up on the floor next to his bed.

For more than two decades, Salinas stirred things up on the vanguard of the nation's gay politics. In the early 1980s he wrote for the New York Native and the Village Voice and was first writer to do a major piece on the radical group Act Up.

At the Bay Area Reporter, he was probably best known for a stark front-page above-the-fold August 13, 1998, headline, which read, "No Obits." The story explained that for the first time in 17 years, the newspaper did not have a single AIDS-related obituary that week.

"It doesn't mean that there is no AIDS," Salinas told the Associated Press at the time. "What it does mean is that people with AIDS are living longer and that we're smarter about the human immune system."

"That was really powerful," said current editor Cynthia Laird. "I remember waiting until our final deadline at 5 o'clock to make sure none came in."

Ironically, it is Salinas' obituary that will run on the front page of today's B.A.R., Laird said.

"Everyone has just been stunned here," said Laird on Wednesday evening.

Throughout his career, Salinas investigated AIDS organizations he thought were corrupt and took on nonprofit executives he felt were overpaid. As an editor, he directed his reporters to explore the finances of the AIDS Ride and the AIDS Foundation, organizations he felt were mismanaged and top-heavy.

"That is something that he really pushed for, mainly because he wanted to money to go to client services," said Laird.

Salinas believed in a crusading brand of advocacy journalism. In the early 1990s, he pushed aggressive coverage of the murder of Allen Schindler, a gay sailor killed in Yokosuka, Japan. The case received national attention because it coincided with debate over President Clinton's "don't ask, don't tell" policy about gays in the military. Salinas sent a reporter to Japan to cover the story.

Eight years ago, he wrote a story on sexual abuse in the church. The headline was "Catholic Church Fails to Finger Fondlers."

"So many time Mike has stood up and taken unpopular stand and withstood the heat and time would go by and he was right on the money," said Carmichael.

His relationship with Carmichael, whom he lived with during his final years, started out as professional one. Carmichael was one of several prisoners with AIDS at the California Medical Facility in Vacaville who went on a hunger strike in 1992 to protest the lack of medical services there. The hunger strike led to the first-ever hospice inside a state prison and forced prisons across the nation to confront HIV/AIDS.

Carmichael credited Salinas with keeping the story in the public eye.

"When I got out of prison, I went to the B.A.R. in San Francisco because it was the paper that kept the story moving," he said. "I wanted to thank the editor on behalf of thousands of prisoners."

Salinas was born in Iowa and his parents broke up when his father announced he was gay. Salinas lived in foster homes for a while before moving to New York. His father, Rick Salinas, lives in San Francisco and owns an art gallery in Hayes Valley.

Despite big-city aspirations and lifestyle, he remained proud of his humble Iowa roots, wearing an Iowa Hawkeye jacket, chastising friends for littering, and disdaining the affectations of the intellectual circles he ran in.

"He was practically inseparable from that jacket," said Teddy Witherington, the director of Pride and an old friend.

But Salinas was more than an activist-journalist. His other great love was theater -- especially musicals -- and it was Broadway that lured him back to New York in 1999, after seven years at the Reporter.

Erik Haagensen, a senior copy editor at Back Stage magazine in New York, where Salinas worked in 1999 and 2000, said Salinas hoped to produce musicals. During the 1980s, he had been a founding editor of Theater Week magazine.

"Every theater queen, myself included, bought Theater Week every week to read him," said Haagensen.

But regaining the prominence that he had enjoyed as a young man in New York was not easy. He struggled with his writing and his job at the Back Stage was short-lived.

"The return to New York was not all he had hoped it would be," said Haagensen. "He felt he had not managed to re-establish himself in theater journalism or gay journalism in ways he had previously established himself."

Friend Jim Provenzano, who writes a sports column for the Bay Area Reporter, said Salinas had recently admitted that he was experimenting with heroin. Provenzano speculated that after 9/11 and a challenging return to New York, Salinas was struggling.

"He was not as tough as people thought," he said. "You can make your mark in New York, but as soon as you leave you are forgotten."

But others say his final days were in fact happy. He had recently been editor of the 2003 Pride guide and was looking forward to editing again next year.

"It's sometimes hard to remember, but we are the lucky ones," he wrote in his Pride Guide editors letter.

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