

UT Football: All-White Just Wasn't Right

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A Public Death

*Mark Spaeth put the spotlight on himself.
Then he found out he couldn't turn it off.*

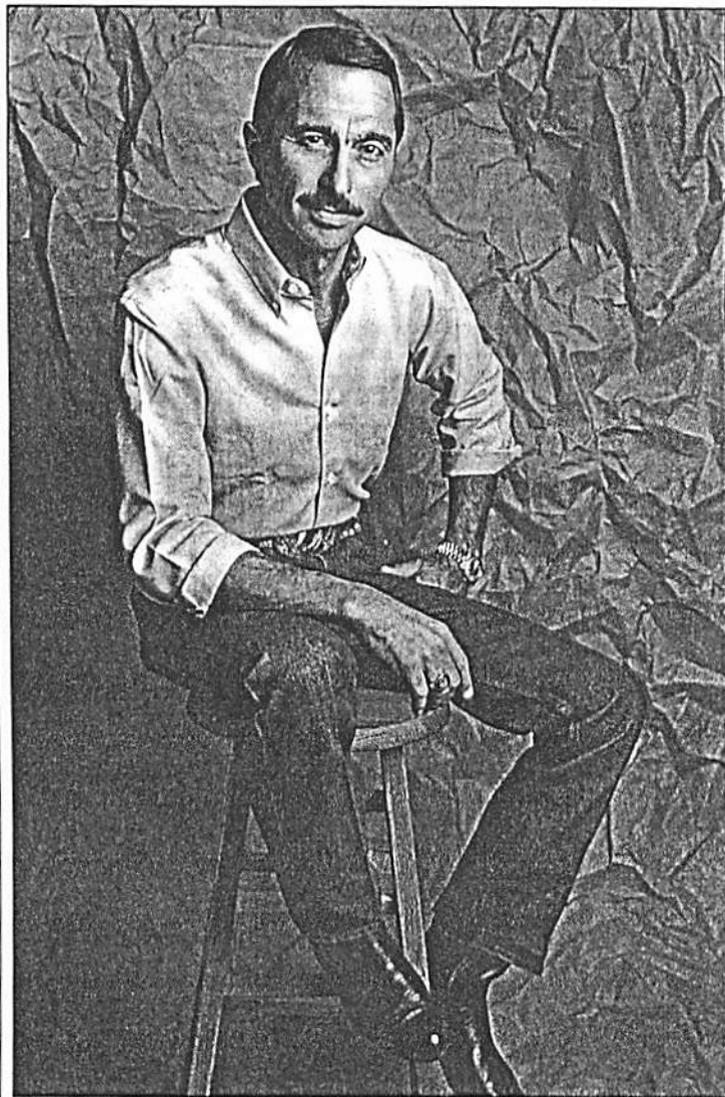
BY TROY STOKES

What's important about Mark Spaeth is not that he's gay, but that everyone perceives him as such. He also likes to be in the limelight. Just watch! He'll run us ragged chasing after the stereotypes he inflates!" I was being lectured by a well-connected architect who had given up on a marriage of 12 years. Now he was trying to balance being a divorced father with being a gay man trying to live his life honestly but without fanfare. And he had absolutely no use for then-city council candidate Spaeth.

Stories about Mark Spaeth do not occur in isolation. They occur in a political context and ultimately are really less about Spaeth than they are about his political friends and enemies. What they include and omit reveals confusion about the boundaries between political misdeeds for which a councilman may reasonably be held accountable and activities that are entirely pri-

vate and thus nobody else's business. Spaeth is at the center of this confusion, because he never gave clear signals as to what was his business and what was ours.

It is not my intention to needlessly forage around in the personal life of the late councilman Mark Spaeth. Nor do I want to advance the argument that every gay politician is an "enemy of the movement" unless he comes out of the closet. I would rather show how Spaeth manipulated the gay subculture to get votes and how, while he was on the council, he propagated misinformation and confusion about Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, which has been called the disease of the century. I will not share any sensational stories about sexual escapades, because I can't imagine how they would be germane to political criticism of a public figure. I also have no use for cute anecdotes about Mr. and Mrs. Spaeth, which are osten-



To the media, Mark Spaeth always played it straight.

sibly about their courtship and married life, but are, in fact, loaded with the kind of innuendo that invites a tabloid sort of twittering about whether or not the councilman was a homosexual.

We need to get the scary questions out of the way first: Mark Spaeth died of AIDS, if the facts reported in the May 28 issue of the *Austin American-Statesman* are correct. He had pneu-

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mocystis carinii pneumonia. There was no indication of the limited variety of lymphomas or use of immunosuppressive drugs that would suggest a categorization other than AIDS. Spaeth was not yet 60 years old. Therefore, according to the guidelines used by the Texas Department of Health, Mark Spaeth had AIDS. It is a simple matter of definition.

Spaeth's sexual orientation is another matter. My perception is that he was gay. I say this because I simply can't imagine a straight politician involving himself with gays the way he did. Please, for the rest of this article, think about the extent to which one's being gay might be like one's being Jewish or Italian. In assessing the role ethnicity plays in discovering the loyalties of any particular political figure, you must look at the individual. For some Jews seeking public office, there will be very little Jewish connection. They may be only incidentally involved in Jewish political, medical, academic, or religious circles. Or they may be heavily networked, but "clean" within the Jewish community. A third scenario would have them be intensely ethnically connected in a corrupt and sinister fashion. The Mafia is an example of this, as it is drawn from Italian-American ethnicity.

Think back to Geraldine Ferraro's try for the vice presidency. The financial dealings of her husband were exposed to intense scrutiny. Though John Zaccaro was apparently not involved in Mafia activities, many of his business relationships were with other Italian-Americans and some were of a questionable nature. While there was a bit of "would we be doing this if he weren't Italian?" journalistic breast-beating, no one seemed to feel they were harassing the candidate's kinfolks by mentioning the obvious fact that they were of Italian extraction. Indeed, magazine articles that wonder aloud whether a black, Hispanic, or female politician has paid his/her dues (or merely gotten a free ride on the civil-rights movement) have become a journalistic commonplace.

However, when the candidate's business and social commitments are to a segment of the gay community, the press is in a fix. The journalistic media obviously can't evaluate that involvement without mentioning it first. In so doing, they are practically accusing the

candidate of being homosexual. This leads to the danger of the public becoming fascinated by the candidate's homosexuality and totally disregarding any allegations of wrongdoing within the gay community. And the media are painfully aware of the possibility of libel proceedings, thus erring in the direction of caution.

What's more, many in the press aren't very clear about the various different ways a candidate might be involved with segments of gay subcultures. Journalists are apt to see an official's gay connection as a bit of private naughtiness rather than as part of a social network worthy of examination. For example, a politician's interaction with the Austin Lesbian/Gay Political Caucus is public and would be relatively easy to discover. But gay business and social connections are much more private; they are hidden from public scrutiny.

Mark Spaeth's connections deserve a little review. From the late '70s on, Spaeth was a visible personality in Austin's gay bars. His behavior there was unlike that of most gays and the typical (gay or straight) politician diffidently and nervously putting himself before the gay public. For one thing, Spaeth often made a grand entry into bars, surrounded by a bevy of business associates and what gay political types labeled his "boy du jour." The Spaeth presence was usually loud and ostentatious; there were often lavish tips to the most attractive waiters.

Spaeth's flamboyant persona only increased with his council campaign. Just days before the runoff, a group of more conventional gay political and business folks were escorting mayoral candidate Lowell Lebermann around to the gay bars. When the group got to the Boat-house, which has a reputation for being popular with the college crowd, they were treated to a view of Spaeth affixing campaign pins to the zipper area of young men's trousers. Can you picture Mullen or Lebermann campaigning like this? I can't.

Spaeth's campaign methodology in the bars was not limited to sexploitation monkeyshines. He used his business connections to garner support from an ad hoc group of gay-bar owners, who made sure that Spaeth literature was prominently displayed in their establishments. UT gay student leader Jay Cherin observed at the time, "He's got the bar/airhead vote in his back pocket!"

Yet while Spaeth wanted gays to vote for him, he avoided any publicly visible connection to the gay community. He had been extremely unsuccessful in getting endorsements for his candidacy; he did not want the endorsement of the Austin Lesbian/Gay Political Caucus to stand out like a sore thumb. So Spaeth sent his campaign manager to the caucus to ask the group *not* to endorse him. As if this shabby duplicity wasn't enough, when I questioned Spaeth about the incident on the Olin Murrell radio program, he denied knowing anything about his odd request to the caucus.

Though this shameful manipulation did not ruin the ALGPC, it was divisive and harmful. Since the beginnings of the gay liberation movement in Central

Texas in the early '70s, there has been needless antagonism between gay activists and established gay business leaders. Activists have been too inclined to be overly suspicious of successful business people, dismissing them as greedy socialites. The latter have often dismissed the activists as malcontents who would rather cause political up-

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roar than put in a day's work. Spaeth's cavalier marginalization of the Austin Lesbian/Gay Political Caucus intensified this polarization, causing us to spend time healing wounds that need not have been inflicted in the first place.

It would simplify matters if we could imagine that Mark Spaeth had no use for gay political activists, but was an honest-to-goodness team player within the gay business elite. Sad to say, he was a manipulator there, too. During the early '80s, Spaeth contracted the services of one of Austin's most prominent gay interior designers, both for routine commercial work as well as for those spiffy condos in which Spaeth intended to reside. The two men had a falling-out. Accounts differ as to whether the antagonism arose from social snubs or business differences, but the result was that Spaeth blackballed this designer. The man got no more business from Spaeth or Spaeth's friends. The business had to go someplace, so it went to a less-established, but talented, gay interior designer who had no close relationship to Spaeth (and who was bewildered as to why he had been so favored).

This strategy had an intimidating effect in the clubby world of gay architects, interior designers, building contractors, real-estate brokers, and landscape people. If the new guy had gotten the business windfall by caprice, the good luck could turn to bad for no reason, as well. I recall an incident when my divorced architect friend was being treated to dinner by business associates at Jeffrey's restaurant. It was the architect's birthday—he was enjoying the wine. Soon he began to loudly ventilate his opinion that Spaeth's bizarre courtship of Amanda Blake was giving the gay community a black eye, making us look like Steven Carrington from "Dynasty"—gay one minute, married the next. This architect was shushed by his hosts, who warned him that he was putting his career at risk.

Why are such successful and well-to-do gay businessmen so vulnerable? At first blush, they might seem pretty well-insulated from the forces that cause the rest of us to conform. Self-employed gays don't have to worry about a homophobic employer. When one member of the group hires another, the chances of getting a job done well are greater because both parties must coexist later in the same social group. However, on closer examination, it becomes obvious that this is a network with its own idio-

syncratic and unexamined rules. The designer mentioned earlier learned the hard way what happens when the wrong people get mad at you. There are questions which have never been answered because they have never been asked in public: Who is the principal lender who finances all these ventures that keep the designers, architects, and real-estate brokers in business? How would conflicts of interest ever be evaluated when the fundamental loyalties are out of public view? Finally, is there a gay political and social orthodoxy which operates like a sort of a fraternal order?

So far we have only looked at reasons why former councilman Spaeth's social, political, and business connections to segments of Austin's gay community were of legitimate interest to anyone who wanted to understand the politician's loyalties. Spaeth was, however, more than a political figure, in the conventional sense of the word. He was a celebrity. In my mind, a politician invites us to evaluate his stands on public issues. He does not necessarily welcome invasion of his private, domestic world. A celebrity invites obsession with the whole person.

Spaeth's manic drive to become a celebrity was made clear to all in his involvement with actress Amanda Blake. Between December 29, 1983, and January 9, 1984, three articles about Spaeth and Blake appeared on the front page of the *Austin American-Statesman*.

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None of the articles portrayed the pair as anticipating married life in the conventional sense. Spaeth indicated that they would occupy opposite wings of their house; there would be a common area for parties. He presented a dozen red roses to Amanda at his inauguration and said to the gathering, "It's not often that a man can publicly say, 'I love you,' to his best friend."

By the spring of 1984, Mark Spaeth had become the city's most celebrated bridegroom, and the *American-Statesman* had become his matron of honor. The kind of criticism the paper allowed is instructive. Letters from several readers were published criticizing the *Statesman* for becoming like the *National Enquirer*, but serious criticism of Councilman Spaeth was off-limits. On January 9, in an article by Tony Tucci, Spaeth stated that his marriage plans were not politically motivated and that had they been, he would have married during the campaign. But back on December 29, Spaeth had said in another article by Tucci that it would be politically better for them to marry since they would be sharing a house.

If straight readers of the paper were irritated, gay activists were furious. Ronald Sawey, co-director of the local gay hotline, wrote a letter to the *American-Statesman* observing that a marriage during the council campaign

would have fouled up Spaeth's strategy of getting gay votes by having gays perceive Spaeth as gay himself. The paper refused to print the political criticism, labeling it an exploration of the councilman's sexual orientation. Of course, it was no such thing—the writer didn't have any knowledge of the councilman's sexual orientation—but the newspaper obtusely missed the point.

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The odd irony is that the transition from politician to celebrity should have signaled the press that Spaeth was ready to live with less privacy than the average city politician. That should have occasioned a more thorough examination of what he was all about. What happened is that Spaeth got more coverage, but less examination. The copy read like breathless society gossip, with all the cute little ironies buried among details of Amanda's television career or descriptions of her clothes. How sad that Tony Tucci, a serious political writer, would lower himself so much!

Clearly, being a celebrity councilman was a formula that was working for Mark Spaeth. What wasn't working was his immune system. By late 1984, it was obvious that something was seriously wrong. In deciding how to share the situation with the public, Spaeth had a choice. It is nowhere written that elected officials have to fill us in on the intimate details of their illnesses. Spaeth could have simply declared his health situation to be a private matter that was his business alone. But to do that would have put him in that desolate territory at the end of the shaggy-dog joke in which the protagonist plaintively exclaims, "... and give up show business?"

So Spaeth did the only thing he knew to do: wrap up his real situation in a lot of hype and hoopla. He reviewed his symptoms in the press. They included fever, malaise, and dizziness. In fact, Spaeth said that he had become so dizzy during a summer 1984 hospitalization in Houston that he had fallen and broken his wrist. His weight loss became noticeable to anyone who saw him in person. To Austin's gay community, this all sounded a lot like the early stages of AIDS. Then Spaeth brought up the matter of blood transfusions, which caused folks to think about AIDS even more. (In a very small number of cases, the virus that causes AIDS has been passed in transfusions. Transfusions are also connected with AIDS in that they are sometimes given to patients in the disease's advanced stages in order to restore some of the blood cells that have been destroyed by the AIDS virus.)

But mere disclosure of facts was not enough! Spaeth had to go on and say his condition was caused by a mystery

virus whose identity had confounded the medical experts at M. D. Anderson Hospital, which is a branch of the University of Texas and the state's leading AIDS research facility. What Spaeth *didn't* do was to give the Anderson doctors legal permission to comment on his case. To do that would have shifted the spotlight to the illness and away from Spaeth—clearly out of the question. So Spaeth made sure that we were all back on the celebrity track by declaring that his doctors were attempting to contact Burt Reynolds' doctors in order to discover if both patients were suffering from the same illness. It's a crazy irony that this Hollywood connection was established by Spaeth at a time when the gossip tabloids were alleging that Reynolds himself had AIDS.

Mark Spaeth remained in character until he died. Spaeth in the limelight transcended all other considerations—even the agony of other gay men who needed truth instead of hype about the most serious disease we will ever have to face. His funeral, which he planned himself, was a symphony of twaddle about Spaeth's integrity, vision, and compassion. Three of the eulogists were distinguished by their unity in a record of disdaining and marginalizing the gay and lesbian civil-rights movement whenever possible: Dr. Gerald Mann, pastor of Riverbend Baptist Church, and former mayors Carole Keeton Rylander and Ron Mullen. It's no irony that they would have so much good to say for Spaeth. After all, he never embarrassed them by suggesting that they were wrong to obstruct gay civil rights. Spaeth was the good team player, like all the other content-free yuppies who embraced the conservatism of Reagan and Hance while muting their discomfort at Falwell's fanaticism.

In all the dismal hypocrisy that surrounded Mark Spaeth, there is one group that acquitted itself well. That is the staff of Brackenridge Hospital and the public-health officials who trace the epidemiology of AIDS. They did their jobs and kept the records confidential, as required by law. I wish I felt the same way about Spaeth's private physician, Robert Griffin, M.D. He also maintained confidentiality during Spaeth's lifetime. But when the patient dies, the duties change. The attending physician is obliged to truthfully list the cause of death on the death certificate, which is public record. There is room on the certificate for the cause of death and two contributing causes. Dr. Griffin simply wrote "pneumonia." He should have written cardio-pulmonary arrest, caused by pneumocystis carinii pneumonia, caused by Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. ☆

Troy Stokes has been a gay activist since 1971, when a group he belonged to sought recognition as a University of Texas student club. He is co-founder of the United Methodist Gay Caucus in the Southwest Conference, co-director of Gayline, and co-chair of the AIDS At-Risk Blood Fund.

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