

Social Justice, Action, and Teaching: The Legacies of Eric Rofes

Christina Accomando

Abstract

This article serves to track the impact and importance of prolific activist, author and mentor Eric Rofes. In particular we explore his contributions and leadership at Humboldt State University prior to his unexpected death in June 2006. His passing left colleagues, students and activists in shock, but also determined to carry on his legacy through their own work.

“We may hate the endless meetings, be sick of licking envelopes, feel frustrated working across different identities and political visions, and be drained by community cannibalism, but we've got to continue doing the work.” —Eric Rofes, 1998

Eric Rofes is known nationally as a prolific author and a seasoned activist for queer liberation and social justice. As a professor of education at Humboldt State University, Eric Rofes fused academia and activism in a rare and dynamic combination that inspired students and colleagues alike. He brought his skills as an organizer, passion for justice and keen intellect to work that spanned the university— from Education to Multicultural Queer Studies, from Women’s Studies and Ethnic Studies to the Environment and Community Program, from Leadership Studies to the university-wide Diversity Plan Action Council.

To the shock of friends and colleagues, Rofes died of a heart attack on June 26, 2006, in Provincetown, Mass., where he was working on his thirteenth book. He was 51 years old. A vibrant and influential leader,

Eric's sudden and untimely death is being mourned around the world. “Eric was an absolute giant of the gay movement -- as an intellectual, an organizer, and an activist,” said feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin. “He was a massive presence, whose influence was felt across a broad range of constituencies . . . It’s as if a mountain has suddenly vanished.”

“Eric Rofes was a life force,” said Kim Berry, chair of HSU’s Department of Critical Race, Gender and Sexuality Studies. “More than any other person on campus he worked systematically to build institutional change for social justice.” Rofes co-chaired HSU's Diversity Plan Action Council (DPAC), which he believed could be the catalyst for diversifying HSU and transforming the university culture, a process that he knew would require strong leadership and sustained effort.

He worked tirelessly and passionately to lead movements that helped create the places where knowledge from different perspectives could be shared constructively, said DPAC co-chair Jyoti Rawal.

The kind, strong and determined energy he brought is a difficult combination to find in a leader; he will be so missed.

Among Rofes' long-term legacies is the groundbreaking North Coast Education Summit, which he built from scratch ten years ago. With a radical focus on education, democracy and social justice, the conference grew exponentially each year, bringing together hundreds of educators, students and community activists from California and beyond. Since Eric's death, the Education Summit merged with the Multicultural Center's annual Diversity Conference and is now the annual Social Justice Summit. The Summit continues to fulfill Eric's vision of connecting people across disciplines, across regions and across differences of race, class, gender and sexuality. Eric consistently saw fostering relationships across differences as a key to effective organizing.

Eric never took his friendships for granted, nor his positions on the issues he cared deeply about, always looking for greater complexity and possibilities for fostering change

said UC Berkeley lecturer and long-time friend Will Seng. "He changed the way we now think of gay men's sexuality and, by his example, prompted many gay men to take a closer look at feminism, class and racism." Eric brought those complex intersections into his organizing, his personal life, and his academic projects. He was at the forefront of the Multicultural Queer Studies (MQS) minor at HSU, the first of its kind in the nation, designed as a rigorous academic program and to help build intellectual, emotional and political community. Rofes wanted to serve HSU students and offer a model for the nation of a queer studies program that would study sexuality and gender as part of a complex matrix that includes race, ethnicity,

class and culture. This intersectional vision continues in a new academic program at HSU, the Department of Critical Race, Gender and Sexuality Studies (CRGS), which offers an interdisciplinary major with pathways in ethnic studies, women's studies and MQS.

"Eric and his partner Crispin were the first gay people we met in Humboldt when we were looking to move here from Southern California," said community organizer Todd Larsen, speaking of Eric's impact on his life and community.

Their friendship gave us a good feeling about moving to Humboldt. Eric was not only a mentor to my partner Michael Weiss and myself personally, but also an influential part in helping us develop Queer Humboldt. He motivated us to be involved in community-building efforts, including Queerhumboldt.org and events to help bridge gaps between the LGBT and other members of our community.

Todd felt that one of Eric's many talents included helping people "think about things from a different perspective. It was like he had a bigger view of the world—a view that others may not see at first."

Always with an eye toward institutional change, Rofes brought together faculty from across the California State University system to create the first-ever CSU-wide queer studies consortium, which developed a website, a listserv, and an annual conference. This effort involved more than sixty faculty in diverse disciplines at over a dozen campuses and is a testament to both Rofes's leadership and his ability to work in coalition.

Above all else, Rofes was a passionate educator. "Eric was an extraordinarily gifted teacher whose courses were rigorous and often life-changing," said education professor Ann Diver-Stamnes.

His passion for teaching was fueled by his commitment to students and by his belief in education as having the power to transform society and reinvigorate democracy. This belief guided his teaching and led him to develop pioneering courses such as Education for Action and Gay and Lesbian Issues in Schools.

These courses are central to the Multicultural Queer Studies program at HSU, and they also serve as a resource for incorporating LGBTQ issues in teacher training programs throughout California (a project that the California Safe Schools Coalition is actively pursuing).

HSU alum David Bracamontes, now at San Francisco State University, remembered the profound impact Rofes had on his life.

I first met Eric at a weekend seminar he taught, and that weekend changed who I was as a student and a gay man. For the first time I had a role model, someone within my community that I could respect and admire. When I later returned to HSU as professional staff, I was honored and humbled to work side-by-side with this man who had changed my life.

Rofes inspired generations of students, from his early days as an elementary school teacher to his most recent work in the School of Education at HSU. "Eric Rofes was a remarkable scholar and teacher," reflected María Corral-Ribordy, an alum from the School of Education and currently a CRGS lecturer.

He had the capacity to see the brilliance in each of his students and nurture our continued development from that point. His uncompromisingly high expectations demonstrate great respect for all his students' individual potential.

Eric inspired María to pursue a career in education, encouraged her community activism and actively mentored her in both endeavors. She and Eric were among the co-founders of Perfect Union, a grassroots website that facilitated strategic dialogue and broad-based activism in the movement for marriage equality.

In his article "Marriage and Civil Disobedience," Rofes described his 2004 San Francisco City Hall wedding to his lover Crispin Hollings:

I joined thousands of people this weekend and defied the laws of my state in a brazen act of civil disobedience. We didn't chain ourselves to a building, sit down in the middle of a crowded intersection, or occupy a public official's office until our demands were met. We simply got married.

He argued for legal efforts paired with well-strategized direct action, pointing out that civil disobedience can "take abstract and highly charged issues and stamp human faces onto them."

His work was always visionary, but also pragmatic. He lived a life of inspiration as a servant and scholar for the people. Unassuming yet undeniable, he wielded a practical passion for change, beyond the armchair of revolution,

recalls colleague and community member Issac M. Carter.

"I want to be a voice affirming the value and heroism of long-term commitment to democratic processes of community organizing," Rofes said in a 1998 speech.

We may hate the endless meetings, be sick of licking envelopes, feel frustrated working across different identities and

political visions, and be drained by community cannibalism, but we've got to continue doing the work.

Continuing the work, for Eric Rofes, meant everything from grassroots organizing to transforming national organizations to transforming teacher education to publishing books. One of his strengths as an activist and scholar was his willingness to work in diverse modes and tread into unknown waters. Rofes's diverse scholarly, creative and collaborative work has ranged from autobiography to joint authorship with elementary school children to social science research to collaborative performance. In the 1980s he published three books featuring the voices of his students at Fayerweather Street School on the difficult topics of parents, divorce and death. *Socrates, Plato and Guys Like Me: Confessions of a Gay Schoolteacher* (Alyson Publishing, 1985) tells the story of his first teaching job and his eventual firing as an elementary school teacher who refused to stay in the closet. Education professor Jeff Sapp testifies to the transformative power of reading this memoir during his own coming-out process:

The impact of Eric's book on my personal and professional life was stunning. Here was a vision of the authentic person I desperately wanted to be in this world. As a somewhat frightened closeted teacher, it was the very first time in my teaching career that I realized I would be OK, that being honest, truthful and having integrity were indeed cornerstones of being a good teacher.

Two decades later, Rofes continued to publish groundbreaking books on education, including *A Radical Rethinking of Sexuality & Schooling: Status Quo or Status Queer* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) and the edited volume *The Emancipatory Promise of Char-*

ter Schools (SUNY Press, 2004).

Rofes's most pioneering work addressed gay men's health, culture and activism, including the important volumes *Reviving the Tribe: Regenerating Gay Men's Sexuality and Culture in the Ongoing Epidemic* (Haworth Press, 1995) and *Dry Bones Breathe: Gay Men Creating Post-AIDS Identities and Cultures* (Haworth Press, 1998). More recently, *Test/Positive/Now: The Infection Monologues* is an experimental, multi-media, multi-voiced performance piece about gay men who test HIV-positive in the contemporary era. San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts presented a pilot performance of the piece in 2005, and Rofes was continuing to develop and expand the work with visual artist Daniel Derdula, poet and hip hop activist Tim'm West and other collaborators. And in the year after his death, Eric's longtime associates Will Seng and Sara Miles collaborated to edit Rofes's final book: *Thriving: Gay Men's Health in the 21st Century*.

Eric Rofes often worked through intense collaborations. One of his greatest skills was bringing people together, and he deeply valued -- and did not take for granted -- the ability to work across differences. "Eric understood that bridging differences is first about full awareness and acknowledgment that difference need not be polarizing," reflects Tim'm West.

His role as a mentor and friend, beyond affirming a powerful spirit of cross-cultural collaboration, reinforced the vast similarities between people who find courage to look beneath the surface for the sense justice that binds the most powerful allies. More than this, for someone who clearly knew so much about a lot of things, Eric's humility fueled a powerful curiosity that marked him as one the great voices for social change in our time.

HSU MultiCultural Center Director Marylyn Paik-Nicely noted that Rofes worked for social change simultaneously within institutions and at the grassroots level.

Eric was committed to and intently focused on the project at hand and truly valued the contributions of people around him. He brought people with their expertise and experiences together to collaborate and create: He really knew how to create communities for change.

Like his other colleagues, Paik-Nicely spoke to both the impossibility of replacing Eric and the need to carry on his work, "We must honor his spirit by continuing the challenging work of cultural transformation at HSU and in the world."

Eric Rofes is survived by his lover of 16 years, Crispin Hollings, and by his mother Paula Casey-Rofes and brother Peter Rofes. Hollings has donated Rofes' books, papers and research files to the James C. Hormel Gay & Lesbian Center at the San Francisco Public Library. Updated information about the availability of these materials and about other ongoing projects can be found at www.ericrofes.com.

Christina Accomando is a Professor of English and Critical Race, Gender and Sexuality Studies at HSU. She is the author of "The Regulations of Robbers": Legal Fictions of Slavery and Resistance (Ohio State University Press), and her articles have appeared in Still Seeking an Attitude: Critical Reflections on the Work of June Jordan, the Norton Critical Edition of Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, and journals including MELUS, African American Review, Feminism & Psychology, and The Antioch Review. Along with Eric Rofes, she is one of the founding members of HSU's Multicultural Queer Studies Minor Program.