

INTERVIEW WITH KAREN ST. LAURENT -- JUNE 1994

Karen St. Laurent was born in Washington D.C. in December, 1942. Her work as director of Houston's Omega House, an AIDS hospice, helped to make it the first licensed special care facility in the state of Texas. A longtime fan of jazz, Karen became an admirer and later a close friend and ally of Dave 's in his struggle with AIDS.

In 1987 after my divorce I found myself thinking, "What in the world am I going to do with myself?" I had worked for a law firm in D.C. for about twelve years, doing radio broadcast license work as an administrative assistant. I'd been reading about AIDS during the '80's and kept seeing these young guys on talk shows being thrown out of their homes because they were gay and I just could never understand that. If you're a parent you love your child unconditionally.

Somebody had told me about this little three resident hospice in Montrose and had said, "Why don't you go over there and see what it's like?" I had been volunteering over at Women's Hospital in the recovery room of all things, and it was just ridiculous. I hated it. So I went over to see the hospice. I've never been a deeply religious person in my life, but boy, I'll tell you what, you do this kind of work and you get real spiritual. I was a volunteer there for a year. I just felt like I belonged, and when the director's position became available I got it.

I was at Omega House for three years and feel that we really put the place on the map. There was no legislation written at the time. Nothing. We had to start from scratch and we ultimately got licensed. Then I started to build a \$500,000 capital campaign to remodel and enlarge the house that we were in. It was an awful lot of work and the best of times and the worst of times too because it taught me so much. We really got a lot of notoriety. We had a Japanese film crew come in at one point. But we became a role model for other special care facilities in the state. I was very proud of the work I did because here I'd been the suburban housewife living with a very intimidating husband, realizing that I could barely boil water. And I picked myself up and dusted myself off and really did something that was very, very worthwhile. I met some amazing human beings and can really empathize with the gay community. I'm not gay myself but I can empathize because of growing up in a very Catholic neighborhood back in the early '50's where I was beaten up and called a dirty Jew, so I know what bigotry feels like. I also know what abandonment feels like because my father basically abandoned our family when I was growing up. So I could really empathize with these guys.

We had seventy-eight residents in a three year period in this little three resident hospice, and at that time they were all men. I was dealing with really a population of middle class gay men, and it was just remarkable. I can't begin to tell you what I was taught. I saw so many things and went through so many things through my work there; it was a great teacher. Someone had described Omega House as "another dimension," and I knew exactly what they were talking about after being there. Volunteers from literally all walks of life came there for one purpose: to take care of these three dying people who were in this house. This was a home for terminally ill indigent PWA's.

So that's how all of this started, and I've been doing this for about seven years, although I quit Omega House after about three years and then started doing casework with the AIDS Foundation. I've lost a lot of good friends but have an awful lot of close friends in the community, and the gay community will always mean a great deal to me. This is just deep down in my soul, although I'm tired too. Real tired.

My respite from all of this death and dying has always been music. I love music and mainly jazz. Growing up in D.C. I got to see and hear a lot of the greats. Here in Houston I would go to a club called Ovations and I loved it. I'd go in there and I'd be in my own little world and just cancel out everything and take in the music. "Entertain me. Just entertain me..."

I heard Dave there one night and said to the owner, "Who's the kid?" He said, "Dave Catney," and I said, "How old is he? He looks like a baby!" At the time he was in his late twenties, and I was just blown away by him. He was just pure genius. I just go crazy when I'm stimulated by someone's playing, when it's really good and really gets down. I love it. But I heard him play and I started going to see him at Cezanne. We'd say hello and that was about it.

One night a couple of years ago he sat down beside me at the bar. Dave knew of my background at Omega House and knew what I had done, and I knew he was sick but of course that's his own business and I never brought it up to him. He said, "You know Karen, would you mind if I called you sometime? You come and listen to me and I watch you and we've talked and everything and I just feel that you're someone that I can trust, that I can talk to." Well that just blew me away because here I was--a virtual stranger to him--and yet he would trust me to tell me what was going on inside his heart and his mind. It brought tears to my eyes. It really did.

The first time we talked was for over two hours on the phone. Dave was a phone-aholic, which I'm sure anybody will tell you. It was just a Dave thing. He loved to talk, and I found him brilliant. The longer I got to know him, he taught me an awful lot about life and mortality. Dave had to learn a lot about really accepting and loving who he was and realizing that it doesn't matter what most people think. It only matters whether you can get up in the morning and look in the mirror and like and respect what you see. I kept telling him how proud I was of him which I was, because he had incredible dignity and incredible strength and courage.

AIDS is really unlike any other disease because of the stigmas attached to it. I've seen so much suffering--I can't even begin to tell you--in the last seven years of my life. And this man was absolutely amazing. Here he was at the time of his life when he ought to be enjoying himself and reaping the rewards of his talent and he had to worry about infusions and how am I going to pay this and who's going to do that....

I became Dave's chauffeur when he started to lose his eyesight a little bit. His peripheral vision was just about gone. He never did go blind but he was afraid of losing his eyesight. He went through some horrendous injections in his eyes. But over the last couple of years we became very, very close. I admired his talent but I

also admired the man and I used to knock on his forehead and say, "I know there's an old man in there. You just can't have this insight at thirty-three!"

He had a beautiful relationship with Scott. It was wonderful to watch the two of them together because there was really real love there and friendship and trust and all the wonderful things that everybody wishes they could have in this life with another person. The two of them had it. I just wish they could have had it longer.

I think Dave really came to terms with the fact that he was dying. He wasn't in denial. He realized it, and I think he was pretty much at peace with just about everything in his life. I just loved him dearly. We used to laugh about it because I'd come into his hospital room and give him a big hug and kiss and some of the nurses used to think, "Oh gosh, now you're going to feel better. Your mom is here." They thought I was his mother, and I would have been very proud to call him my son. That's for sure.

You know, you meet a lot of people in your life and you get close to a lot of people, but there are just a very few who get deep down into your soul, and he did. It was an unusual and beautiful friendship that we had, and I thank Scott and Linda for allowing me to share Dave with them.

He was just incredible to watch and listen to at the piano. He knew I liked Black Orpheus, a song I just think is unbelievable. I came in to Cezanne one night with Dave's eye doctor, who had never heard him play before. He looked at me, and I said to him, "He's going to blow you right out of the water!" He looked at me like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah " So Dave played the song, and I thought I was going to need oxygen because I almost held my breath. About halfway through his doctor looked at me and said, "Jesus, he's incredible!" I said, "I told you. I'm such a tough critic, you've got to be good for me to like you." I don't know anyone who didn't know Dave who didn't think he was an amazing human being.

We met for lunch one day, and I could tell that he wasn't feeling very well. This was before Reality Road came out, and he said, "I want you to listen to this. This is my new CD." We listened to it in my car; it was on a cassette. He said, "What do you think of this song?", and he played Little Prayer for me. I looked at him and I said, "Dave, you've got to put lyrics to this. You just have to. It's so fabulous." So he went home and that night he wrote the lyrics. That just blows my mind.

Everybody says that I'm the musician's best friend because it's just a joy for me. He gave me so much pleasure and he once said to me, "You know, you give me so much. I wish I could give back to you." And I said, "Oh my God. You give back to me every time you sit down at that piano and start to play. You have no idea the pleasure that I get from just hearing you play." But I remember that he was so proud of his CD.

I love to take baths, and so did Dave. I remember the closest I think I ever felt to him was two weeks before he died. He was in the hospital and he started to cry, and I tried very hard to maintain my composure with him. I used to run out of there and just about croak, but with him I was able to stay pretty strong because I knew he

needed that. He was so restless one day and was in a lot of pain, and that's when I went out and bought him his bath pillow. So I got this bathtub running for him, and his back hurt him so bad that when he got in the tub I said, "Do you want me to wash your back?", and he said, "Oh, I would love that." So I went in there and washed his back and gave him a shampoo and rubbed his head. It was really a very intimate, friendly thing to do, and we felt close to each other. It really was very, very special. You can't do that with just everybody. And so when I get in my tub now I talk to him. I tell him how much I miss him and I tell him, "Gee, I wish you had seen the show at Ovations. It really was neat. You would have loved it ..." That kind of thing. I know it sounds ridiculous but I just feel he'll always be with me.

I used to tell him all the time how much I loved him, and he knew I meant it because I don't say things I don't mean. It was just a very beautiful friendship that he and I had. I tried to get him some financial assistance and I think that's how we became friendlier, because I was helping him in any way that I could. It made things a little easier for him.

We had some wonderful talks about life and death and about appreciating things and people, and his insight was amazing. I think that you learn a lot from the dying. You really do if you will just open your mind and let some of that sink in, because they have a lot to teach you. I asked Dave one time if he was scared and he said, "Yes." I said, "I bet you're going to tell me that it's not the dying you're afraid of; it's the getting there," and he said, "Yes." He said that he was tired. His whole day and evenings were nothing but medicine and infusions. That was Dave's life. I can't tell you the amount of medication this man was taking day and night.

Dave was a very controlling individual. He wanted to control everything. I remember the day he went in the hospital the last time, he called me and said, "I'm in the hospital." I said, "I'll be there in a few minutes." I was only two minutes from the hospital and I went there, and he's pointing his finger "OK," he said, "Now I want this moved here and this moved there " I mean he's running me ragged and I said, "Hey listen Catney, what the hell do you think I am? United Van Lines?" We laughed, but he wanted everything just the way he wanted it, and that's the way he was with his music as well. His piano had to be tuned just so, the amps just so; everything just the way he wanted it. At his memorial service there was a tremendous thunder and lightning storm and the lights flickered on and off, and we thought, "Ah, Dave's up there running things. Still!"

But I remember us talking about his life, and there were a lot of things that he wanted to do, but I think he was satisfied with his career. He had wanted to get another CD out and he did. He was honored--thank God--so many times while he was still alive, and that was a wonderful thing.

Thank God he had Scott because Scott is an incredible human being. I absolutely adore him. He's another one, a twenty-six year old man with the insight of a sixty-five year old person. Just watching the love that they shared together was beautiful. It really was beautiful, and we all should have that in our lifetime. Scott was awfully good to Dave.

I guess I got thrown into his life because he knew that I understood, and he could talk to me and I would know what he was talking about without him having to explain. He knew that I had worked in this field and had been so close to so many people. And for me it is a privilege to share in somebody's life and their death with them. That's really a privilege, and I think that's why Dave and I became friends, because he knew that he wouldn't have to explain.

So many times I have heard PWA's say to me. "I have to explain everything to people." And I'd say "No you don't. You just tell people "If you want to know, go to the library." You are not a guinea pig and you are not a teacher. Just have them go and find out for themselves", because it's wearing to try and explain to people how you feel with this disease." With AIDS you can wake up in the morning and feel wonderful and two hours later you're ready to go to your death. It's just so yo-yo, and people don't understand that. "What's wrong with you? Why can't you do this? You were just up an hour ago..." They don't understand it. So I think that had a lot to do with our becoming friends. And Dave also knew that I adored him.

One of my favorite songs is My Foolish Heart, and he sang that one time at Cezanne, and I just went crazy. I said, "Oh my God, you've got the sexiest voice. You've got to sing!" And he laughed, "Oh Karen, go away. You're so biased" I said, "That's true, but honest." He never got a chance to record the song, but I wish he had because I loved his singing voice and thought it was just great.

We spent a lot of time in the car because I'd be taking him back and forth to the doctor. And while Scott was working and Linda was working, I wasn't or I was working at night so I could help out during the day and help pick up all his medicines and things. We'd have some laughs. Dave never really lost his sense of humor and would always find something to laugh about.

I loved him. I thought he was one of the most gorgeous human beings too, and he used to laugh at me, but he reminded me of Tom Cruise a lot when he was well. And he'd laugh. "God," he said, "I look awful." And I said, "I'm going to tell you something. I don't care how many KS lesions you get or whatever. You will always be gorgeous to me. Always." And he always was. Even on the day he died.

This was a big thing to him. I think it was very hard for him to come to terms with this in the public. And because--let's face it--it's not an easy thing to be a public figure and have AIDS. I think most people knew that Dave was gay and I think they knew he was ill. You'd have to be an idiot not to know. But that was a big thing with him. He just wasn't prepared to go out in public. But then we'd talk and talk and talk and talk about it, and I think that with everybody's love and support he felt comfortable finally with who he was. I used to try to tell him all the time, "You be proud of who you are and understand that when people look at you they're not saying, "There goes Dave Catney, the gay guy with AIDS who plays piano." They say, "There goes Dave Catney, the great jazz pianist." That's what they say." And I think he finally believed that. It just didn't matter to anybody. To virtually everybody who counted in his life it didn't matter. But still, that's very difficult.

And then you've got a lover--a partner--and you think, "What's the quality of life for my partner when I've got tubes from everywhere and all I'm doing is infusing and throwing up and getting sick? What kind of a life is that?" That was a lot for him to adjust to as well, but he did. I don't know that I could do that and I'm years older than Dave. He had his bad times, his down times and all of course. He wouldn't be human if he didn't. But for all intents and purposes and out in public he was phenomenal.

Dave could work a room better than anyone I ever watched. I used to sit at the bar and watch him at Cezanne. He was just very animated, talking a mile a minute, constantly talking all the time. You just really could hardly get a word in with him because he loved to talk. His command of the language was awesome and he would say something and he had everybody's attention. He was a presence and when he walked into a room, everybody wanted to be with Dave. I think everybody was blown away by his talent because of his age.

Dave had fans from all ages, young and old. He was very well respected by the kids at the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts; he'd let them come in and sit and jam with him. There was a couple who used to come from an hour away to every one of his performances, and they were up there in age. I used to look around the room and just see the difference in ages and the different kinds of people who would come and listen to this man.

AIDS is such a tremendous, tremendous waste, and I've seen so much of it. I get very angry sometimes but I don't try to teach anybody anymore because it just doesn't work. If you can't get it, then it's not my job to teach you. So many times when I was at Omega House I'd get calls from people telling me, "Why don't you just let these faggots die? They got what they deserved, and they're this and they're that " One time I just lost it and said, "Let me tell you something. These men have more masculinity and courage and bravery in their little thumbnail than you will ever have in your entire body." Because these guys are facing the ultimate--which we all have to face--at twenty, thirty, forty, when they shouldn't even have to be thinking about things like this. And doing so with such courage and dignity. It used to just blow my mind. It humbled me so. I always went in and hugged the residents in the morning and then at lunch and then before I went home at night. These men had amazing courage, and you can't tell people this because they're not going to understand. It used to frustrate me but then I figured, "If you can't find out for yourself what real life and real people are about, then it's not my job to teach you." It just got very wearing.

But Dave was one of the most incredible human beings I've ever met. I really adored him.

During Dave's last trip home his lung collapsed. He'd called me on the Friday night and a Saturday night, and I went over there. All he had to do was say, "Come," and I went there immediately. On Friday night he was in tears. We sat up in his bed and we talked. I tried to make him as comfortable as I could and I knew from my own experience that what he was doing was dying; the restlessness and everything. I could just look in his face and see that he was dying.

Scott had called me to let me know that Dave was back in the hospital, and I threw my clothes on and ran over there. I don't know whether you'll understand this or not and I don't understand it myself, but I'm telling you that it's happened with me so many times with my friends who have been sick and died and with the residents at Omega House. Not with every one of them but just some of them. I'll try to explain this. They look almost through me when they're looking at me. I'll look right in their eyes, and it's like, "Please understand," or "You have to know what's happening," or "I know you know and I'm trying to say something to you." It's just so strange. It's a look they give me, and it's almost like they're looking right into my soul. It's like, "I know you understand and I'm glad you're here and I know you know what's going to happen." It's almost eerie. When I walked in, Dave was in such pain that morning. They had just put a chest tube in him. He gave me that look, and it just about broke my heart because I could see the pain he was in.

I was going to go see him the night before he died but I didn't. I thought, "Let Scott have the time. Let Linda have the time. Let other people have the time to go see him." Scott called the next morning and told me that Dave had passed away just a few minutes before. I went up to the hospital right after that to say goodbye to him.

I think Dave was pretty much at peace with everything. I know he was tired. The quality of your life has a lot more to do with wanting to be around than the quantity, and his quality of life was really diminishing week by week. He had a miserable last week at home. It was very, very difficult. I think Dave knew what was happening and he was scared; there were all kinds of things going on in his head. Being in hospice--it's very interesting--but people start dying from the feet up. Everything was starting to shut down, and that's why he was so terribly, terribly restless.

But when I walked into the hospital room, he gave me that look. "You and I know." The first few times I'd seen it with people it used to make me real uncomfortable because I didn't understand it. But having gone through this so much I understand it now.

The basis of our relationship was that he knew that he could tell me what was inside of him, where maybe someone else might not understand and could not help him with that because they hadn't had the experience that I had had. He knew that he could trust me, number one. He knew that I loved him and that I would do anything in my power for him. Anything. That was the basis of our friendship. I was a safety zone for Dave, and he didn't have to be "on" 'with me. I'd like to think that I brought some comfort to him. He said that I did, that he felt real safe with me and that I settled him down. I was glad I could do that. He didn't have to explain anything, and I think it was comforting to him to know that "No, you're not losing your mind" and "This is all very normal, and your feelings and your fears," and "These are the stages you'll probably go through," and "Don't be afraid because we're here for you..." That kind of thing.

Dave gave me a lot. You do this work and you're with people who are dying and it puts your own life in perspective. You realize what's important and what isn't. I wish everybody could work with the dying for a day

or two in their life because I really think it would change this world. I really do. Everybody would change if we would just look at this. Of course we don't want to look at illness. We don't want to look at death and we don't want to hear about all this stuff. It's not pretty.

I was like that in the beginning because I was a person who didn't like to be around anyone who was sick, much less dying. I remember when we had our first few deaths at Omega House I ran! And then when I became director I used to have to go down and pronounce, and that meant touching someone who was dead. I made myself do this. And I realized that most of the time the deaths are very peaceful. It's not macabre, like you hear. Usually it's very calm, and it took away the fears that I had growing up, because we're just not taught this.

All I can tell you is that I'm a better person for having known Dave and I don't regret the work that I've done the last seven years. I've given so much of my life and everything that's in me to this community. And believe me, I didn't start out that way. I had to prove to this community that I wasn't some bored housewife trying to save the world. I felt powerfully that "This is what I'm supposed to be doing;" something I'd never felt before in a job sense. Like "God wants me to be here."

Dave used to laugh because I'd say, "When I have to vacuum I put on your CD's so I'll move!" I'm just glad that his doctors could take care of him, and there were no questions asked. And I thanked them for that, because Dave didn't have to be stuck in a community hospital. In fact I wrote to the CEO of the hospital and thanked him for taking good care of Dave, and he wrote me back as a matter of fact.

Dave had those nurses running back and forth, the social workers, the whole damn hospital. Whatever Dave wanted he got. They ran all over themselves. And everybody did it gladly. You couldn't help it. If you knew him you would know what I was talking about. Dave was terribly admired by everybody and everybody wanted to help. It was wonderful.

I used to call him every couple of days up and I'd say on the answering machine, "Just know that I love you and I'm thinking about you. If you need anything you call me." And he would call maybe a week later: "Don't be mad at me...." I once said to him, "I want you to stop apologizing to me right now. That's not the kind of friendship that we have. I'm calling--not because I want you to call me back--but just so you know that I'm thinking about you and I love you. When you want to talk to me and you're free, call me."

But you see everybody wanted a piece of Dave. Even in this hospital room he had all these signs up on the door to his room. "DON'T COME IN," and blah, blah, blah. That didn't mean anything. Everybody went in. To the point where the man couldn't even rest because he didn't know when to say, "Get out of here!" That's the kind of man he was. I used to say, "You'd have to be a Communist not to love Dave!" and he'd laugh like hell. But it was the truth. You couldn't help but love this man. You'd have to be crazy not to love him. He wasn't perfect. He was a human being with faults and everything. that everybody else has. But there was so much to

him. Just so much to him. And he got so that he understood himself so well, and I think came to terms with who Dave Catney was. I was glad to see that.