

Mills Roger Omalý

Died: July 23, 1984

Mills died on Monday, July 23, 1984, at St. Vincent's Hospital in New York, 13 months after he was diagnosed as having acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). He was 44 years old.

He was a path-breaker for our class, both because of his visible participation in providing spiritual leadership at four of our reunions before his passing, and because of his honest and highly visible acceptance of his condition and how he courageously used it to help others, and us all.

Mills grew up in Hinsdale, Illinois, a suburb west of Chicago. In high school there he was treasurer of the student council, and on the yearbook. He sang in the glee club, played in the band.

At Dartmouth he majored in English and became a member of Delta Tau Delta. For one year he became involved in dormitory government. He sang in the glee club all four years and was a member of the Canterbury Association (the Episcopalian society) the same, becoming chairman of its executive council his senior year.

Mills' death brought forth offers to write obituaries from a number of those who knew him, an outpouring noted in the October 1984 Alumni Magazine. Both an obituary and a short comment were published that month, neither carrying the name of the author, both found in college archives. The following account is stitched together from both these sources.

After graduation Mills got a master's degree in English from Northwestern in 1962, following the apparent recommendation of his bishop, who to Mills' reported disappointment suggested he delay his religious studies for this purpose. He finally earned his master's of divinity from The General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church in New York City in 1965.

There followed a series of postings at different Episcopal churches in New York and New Hampshire, and a chaplaincy at Vassar College. He also held a number of church offices.

He then became rector at All Saints' Episcopal Church in Briarcliff Manor, New York, about 35 miles north of New York City.

An account of what happened next, and how it came to be known, was published in the Alumni Magazine comment noted above. Its author, evidently affiliated with the magazine, writes in the first person, quoting an anonymous classmate of ours, who in turn quotes Mills:

“Unusually I had several offers of obituaries and more material than I could fit in. Furthermore, Mills was ‘entirely ready to tell about his life on the grounds that it might be instructive,’ according to one classmate, who asked that his name not be used on the grounds that the rest of us might conclude that he, too, was homosexual. Here is part of the obituary that he [the classmate] prepared:

‘Just six months after taking the post (as rector of All Saints’ in Briarcliff Manor), Mills found he was suffering from AIDS. Fearing that general knowledge that Mills was a homosexual and an AIDS carrier would cause mass flight from the church, the Vestry of All Saints’ asked for and received his resignation, though voting to continue his salary until his future plans took shape.

Mills founds in those few weeks some joy and much despair. The joyful part came from taking part in a parade immediately after preaching his final sermon. ‘I jumped in my car and raced to New York City to join 150,000 others in the annual Gay Pride Day parade. I marched in my clerical collar. It was the first time I was completely ‘out’ as a gay person. It made me feel like a real human being,’ [Mills is quoted as saying].

The despair of being rejected by his church and the awesome realization that he had an inevitably fatal disease pulled him down. So did his conversations with his former wife who had only recently learned of his homosexuality. ‘Every part of my life has been run asunder,’ he said.”

It should be noted that the website for All Saints’ Episcopal Church in Briarcliff Manor now, more than 25 years later, states: “We welcome all, young and old, singles and couples, gay and straight, traditional and nontraditional families, the certain and the questioning, and those of every ethnic and religious background.”

Mills spent the rest of his professional career, with the encouragement of Paul Moore, bishop of New York, pursuing a ministry amongst AIDS sufferers, working with the Gay Men’s Health Crisis Organization, visiting AIDS victims who were hospitalized in New York. Dr. Donald Ginter ’62, a fraternity brother of Mills’ at Bones Gate, later wrote that “having learned of his fatal illness, Mills devoted his remaining time to educating and comforting those who shared his fate. He called this his ‘new ministry,’ deftly turning tragedy into hope.”

Our anonymous classmate, whose offered obituary is referenced in the comment quoted above, closed the obituary he wrote with the following:

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“Mill’s ministry did not turn out as he might have expected Yet in some essential way, it did reflect those deeply held religious convictions that sustained him through life: caring, serving forgiving There are many people who will celebrate his life. Many of his classmates are among them.”