
AIDS in the Heartland

Jacqui Banaszynski

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Death is no stranger to the heartland. It is as natural as the seasons, as inevitable as farm machinery breaking down and farmers' bodies giving out after too many years of too much work.

But when death comes in the guise of AIDS, it is a disturbingly unfamiliar visitor, one better known in the gay districts and drug houses of the big cities, one that shows no respect for the usual order of life in the country.

The visitor has come to rural Glenwood, Minn.

Dick Hanson, a well-known liberal political activist who homesteads his family's century-old farm south of Glenwood, was diagnosed last summer with acquired immune deficiency syndrome. His partner of five years, Bert Henningson, carries the AIDS virus.

In the year that Hanson has been living — and dying — with AIDS, he has hosted some cruel companions: blinding headaches and failing vision, relentless nausea and deep fatigue, falling blood counts and worrisome coughs and sleepless, sweat-soaked nights.

He has watched as his strong body, toughened by 37 years on the farm, shrinks and stoops like that of an old man. He has weathered the family shame and community fear, the prejudice and whispered condemnations. He has read the reality in his partner's eyes, heard the death sentence from the doctors and seen the hopelessness confirmed by the statistics.

But the statistics tell only half the story—the half about dying.

Statistics fail to tell much about the people they represent. About people like Hanson—a farmer who has nourished life in the fields, a peace activist who has marched for a safer planet, an idealist and gay activist who has campaigned for social justice, and now an AIDS patient who refuses to abandon his own future, however long it lasts.

The statistics say nothing of the joys of a carefully tended vegetable garden and new kittens under the shed, of tender teasing and magic hugs. Of flowers that bloom brighter and birds that sing sweeter and simple pleasures grown profound against the backdrop of a terminal illness. Of the powerful bond between two people who pledged for better or worse and meant it.

“Who is to judge the value of life, whether it's one day

or one week or one year?” Hanson said. “I find the quality of life a lot more important than the length of life. “Much has been written about the death that comes with AIDS, but little has been said about the living. Hanson and Henningson want to change that. They have opened their homes and their hearts to tell the whole story—beginning to end.

This is the first chapter.

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The tiny snapshot is fuzzy and stained with ink. Two men in white T-shirts and corduroys stand at the edge of a barnyard, their muscled arms around each other's shoulders, a puzzled bull watching them from a field. The picture is overexposed; but the effect is pleasing, as if that summer day in 1982 was washed with a bit too much sun.

A summer later, the same men — one bearded and one not, one tall and one short — pose on the farmhouse porch in a mock American Gothic. Their pitchforks are mean looking and caked with manure. But their attempted severity fails; dimples betray their humor.

They are pictured together often through the years, draped with ribbons and buttons at political rallies, playing with their golden retriever, Nels, and, most frequently, working in their lavish vegetable garden.

The pictures drop off abruptly after 1985. One of the few shows the taller man, picking petunias from his mother's grave. He is startlingly thin by now; as a friend said, “like Gandhi after a long fast.” His sun-bleached hair has turned dark, his bronze skin pallid. His body seems slack, as if it's caving in on itself.

The stark evidence of Dick Hanson's deterioration mars the otherwise rich memories captured in the photo album. But Hanson said only this:

“When you lose your body, you become so much closer to your spirit. It gives you more emphasis of what the spirit is, that we are more important than withering skin and bone.”

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Hanson sat with his partner, Bert Henningson, in the small room at Minneapolis' Red Door Clinic on April 8, 1986, waiting for the results of Hanson's AIDS screening test.

He wouldn't think about how tired he had been lately. He had spent his life hefting hay bales with ease, but now was having trouble hauling potato sacks at the Glenwood factory where he worked part time. He had lost 10 pounds, had chronic diarrhea and slept all afternoon. The dishes stayed dirty in the sink, the dinner uncooked, until Henningson got home from teaching at the University of Minnesota Morris. It must be the stress.

His parents had been forced off the farm and now he and his brothers faced foreclosure. Two favorite uncles were ill. He and Henningson were bickering a lot, about the housework and farm chores and Hanson's dark mood.

He had put off having the AIDS test for months, and Henningson hadn't pushed too hard. Neither was eager to know.

Now, as the nurse entered the room with his test results, Hanson convinced himself the news would be good. It had been four years since he had indulged in casual weekend sex at the gay bathhouse in Minneapolis, since he and Henningson committed to each other. Sex outside their relationship had been limited and "safe," with no exchange of semen or blood. He had taken care of himself, eating homegrown food and working outdoors, and his farmer's body always had responded with energy and strength. Until now.

"I put my positive thinking mind on and thought I'd be negative," Hanson said. "Until I saw that red circle."

The reality hit him like a physical punch. As he slumped forward in shock, Henningson-typically pragmatic-asked the nurse to prepare another needle. He, too, must be tested. Then Henningson gathered Hanson in his arms and said, "I will never leave you, Dick."

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Hanson is one of 210 Minnesotans and 36,000 Americans who have been diagnosed with AIDS since the disease was identified in 1981. More than half of those patients already have died, and doctors say it is only a matter of time for the rest. The statistics show that 80 to 90 percent of AIDS sufferers die within two years of diagnosis; the average time of survival is 14 months after the first bout of pneumocystis—a form of pneumonia that brought Hanson to the brink of death last August and again in December.

"For a long time, I was just one of those statistics," Hanson said. "I was a very depressing person to be around. I wanted to get away from me."

He lost 20 more pounds in the two weeks after receiving his test results. One of his uncles died and, on the morning of the funeral, Hanson's mother died unexpectedly. Genevieve Hanson was 75 years old, a

gentle but sturdy woman who was especially close to Dick, the third of her six children. He handled the arrangements, picking gospel hymns for the service and naming eight of her women friends as honorary pallbearers — a first in the history of their tiny country church.

But Hanson never made it to his mother's funeral. The day she was buried, he collapsed of exhaustion and fever. That night, Henningson drove him to Glenwood for the first of three hospitalizations — 42 days worth-in 1986.

"Dick was real morbid last summer," Henningson said. "He led people to believe it was curtains, and was being very vague and dramatic. We all said to be hopeful, but it was as if something had gripped his psyche and was pulling him steadily downward week after week."

Hanson had given up, but Henningson refused to. He worked frantically to rekindle that spark of hope — and life. He read Hanson news articles about promising new AIDS drugs and stories of terminal cancer patients defying the odds. He brought home tapes about the power of positive thinking and fed Hanson healthy food. He talked to him steadily of politics and all the work that remained to be done.

He forced himself, and sometimes Hanson, to work in the garden, making it bigger than ever. They planted 58 varieties of vegetables in an organic, high-yield plot and christened it the Hope Garden.

But Hanson returned to the hospital in August, dangerously ill with the dreaded pneumonia. His weight had dropped to 112 from his usual 160. He looked and walked like an old-man version of himself. "I had an out-of-body type experience there, and even thought I had died for a time," he said. "It was completely quiet and very calm and I thought, 'This is really nice.' I expected some contact with the next world. Then I had this conversation with God that it wasn't my time yet, and he sent me back."

Hanson was home in time to harvest the garden, and to freeze and can its bounty. He had regained some of his former spunk, and was taking an interest again in the world around him.

"I'd be sitting next to him on the couch, holding his hand, and once in a while he'd get that little smile on his face and nod like there was something to hold on to," Henningson said. "And a small beam of life would emerge."

A month later, Hanson's spirits received another boost when he was honored at a massive fund-raising dinner. Its sponsors included DFL notables — among them Gov. Rudy Perpich, Lt. Gov. Marlene Johnson, St. Paul Mayor George Latimer, Minneapolis Mayor Don Fraser and Congressmen Bruce Vento and Martin Sabo

— and radical political activists Hanson had worked with over the years, farmers who had stood with him to fight farm foreclosures and the West Central power line, women who remembered his support during the early years of the women’s movement, members of the gay and lesbian community and other AIDS sufferers.

What started as a farewell party, a eulogy of sorts, turned into a celebration of Hanson’s life. Folk singer Larry Long played songs on an Indian medicine man’s healing flute. Friends gathered in a faith circle to will their strength to Hanson. Dozens of people lined up to embrace Hanson and Henningson. For most, it was the first time they had touched an AIDS patient.

“People are coming through on this thing and people are decent,” Hanson said. “We find people in all walks of life who are with us in this struggle. ... It’s that kind of thing that makes it all worth it.”

So when the pneumonia came back in December, this time with more force, Hanson was ready to fight. “The doctor didn’t give him any odds,” Henningson said. Hanson was put on a respirator, funeral arrangements were discussed, estranged relatives were called to his bedside.

“He wrote me a note,” Henningson said. “When can I get out of here?” He and I had never lied. to each other, and I wasn’t about to start. I said, ‘You might be getting out of here in two or three days, but it might be God you’re going to see. But there is a slim chance, so if you’ll just fight...’”

People from Hanson’s AIDS support group stayed at the hospital round the clock, in shifts, talking to him and holding his hand as he drifted in and out of a coma. Friends brought Christmas to the stark hospital room: cards papered the walls and a giant photograph of Hanson’s Christmas tree, the one left back at the farmhouse, was hung.

The rest was up to Hanson.

“I put myself in God’s healing cocoon of love and had my miracle,” he said. “I call it my Christmas miracle.”

He was released from intensive care on Christmas Eve day and since has devoted his life to carrying a seldom-heard message of hope to other AIDS patients, to give them — and himself — a reason to live as science races to find a cure.

“I’d like to think that God has a special purpose for my life,” he said. His smile under the thinning beard is sheepish; faith is personal, and easily misunderstood.

“I don’t want to come across like Oral Roberts, but ... I believe that God can grant miracles. He has in the past and does now and will in the future. And maybe I can be one of those miracles, the one who proves the experts wrong.”

■ ■ ■

Hanson has spent his life on the front line of underdog causes — always liberal, often revolutionary and sometimes unpopular.

“Somewhere along the line Dick was exposed to social issues and taught that we can make a difference,” said Mary Stackpool, a neighbor and fellow political activist. “That’s what Dick has been all about—showing that one person can make a difference.”

Hanson put it in terms less grand: “You kind of have to be an eternal optimist to be a farmer. There’s something that grows more each, year than what you put into the farm. ... I’ve always been involved in trying to change things for the better.”

He was born into the national prosperity of 1950 and grew up through the social turmoil of the 1960s. A fifth-grade teacher sparked his enthusiasm in John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign. He was 13 when his father joined the radical National Farmers Organization, took the family to picket at the Land O’ Lakes plant in nearby Alexandria and participated in a notorious milk-dumping action.

He later led rural campaigns for Eugene McCarthy, George McGovern, Mark Dayton, and his current hero, Jesse Jackson. He led protests against the Vietnam War and was a conscientious objector. He organized rival factions to try to stop construction of the high voltage power line that snakes through western Minnesota.

He was an early member of the farm activist group Groundswell, fighting to stop a neighbor’s foreclosure one day, his own family’s the next. The 473-acre Hanson farm has been whittled to 40 by bankruptcy; Hanson and Henningson are struggling to salvage the farmhouse and some surrounding wetlands.

He has been arrested five times, staged a fast to draw attention to the power line protest and stood at the podium of the 1980 DFL district convention to announce — for the first time publicly— that he was gay. That same year, he was elected one of the first openly gay members of the Democratic National Committee and, in 1984, made an unsuccessful bid for the party’s nomination for Congress from the Second District. In 1983, he and Henningson were photographed in their fields for a 1983 Newsweek magazine story about gays responding to the AIDS crisis; neither knew at the time they carried the virus.

“He just throws himself into a cause and will spare nothing,” Stackpool said. “He will expose himself totally to bring out the desired good.”

Now the cause is AIDS. The struggle is more personal, the threat more direct. But for Hanson, it has become yet another opportunity to make a difference.

“He’s handling this just as he would anything else—with strength and lots of courage and hope,” said Amy Lee, another longtime friend and fellow activist. “And

with that pioneering spirit. If there's anything he can do, any way he can help other victims, any time he can speak — he'll go for it."

Hanson has become one of the state's most visible AIDS patients. He and Henningson are frequently interviewed for news stories, were the subject of a recent four-part series on KCMT-TV in Alexandria and speak at AIDS education seminars in churches and schools throughout the state. Last month, Hanson addressed the state Senate's special informational meeting on AIDS.

"I want to take the mask off the statistics and say we are human beings and we have feelings," he said. "I want to say there is life after AIDS."

Rather than retreat to the anonymity of the big city, as many AIDS sufferers do, Hanson has maintained a high political profile in Pope County. He is chairman of the DFL Party in Senate District 15. He and Henningson continue to do business with area merchants and worship weekly at the country church of Hanson's childhood, Barsness Lutheran.

"I've always been a very public person and I've had no regrets," Hanson said. "One thing my dad always emphasized was the principle that honesty was the most important thing in life."

Hanson and Henningson use their story to personalize the AIDS epidemic and to debunk some of the stereotypes and myths about AIDS and its victims. They are farmers who have milked cows, slopped hogs and baled hay like everyone else. Their politics and sexual orientation may disturb some. But their voices and values are more familiar, and perhaps better understood, than those of some of their urban counterparts.

"It makes people aware that it can happen here," said Sharon Larson, director of nursing at Glacial Ridge Hospital in Glenwood.

That honesty has carried a price. A conservative Baptist minister from Glenwood criticized their lifestyle at a community forum and again in a column in the *Pope County Tribune*. Some of Hanson's relatives were upset by the Alexandria television show and demanded he keep his troubling news to himself. There have been rumblings in his church from people concerned about taking communion with him, and a minor disturbance erupted in a Glenwood school when his niece was teased about him.

But his connections also carry clout.

"It brings it a little closer home to the guys in the Capitol who control the purse strings," a fellow AIDS patient said.

When they speak, Hanson and Henningson touch on a variety of topics: the need for national health insurance to guarantee equitable care, the cruelty of

policies that force AIDS patients into poverty before they are eligible for medical assistance, the need for flex-time jobs so AIDS sufferers can continue to be productive, the imperative of safe sex.

They also stress the personal aspects of the disease: the need for patients to be touched rather than shunned, the importance of support from family and friends and, most dear to Hanson, the healing powers of hope.

"I know there are some who die because they give up," he said. "They have no hope, no reason to fight. Everything they're faced with is so desperate and dismal. ... I believe the biggest obstacle for us who have AIDS or an AIDS-related complex is fighting the fear and anxiety we have over the whole thing. Every positive thing, every bit of hope is something to hold on to."

■ ■ ■

Next month, Hanson and Henningson will celebrate five years together, perhaps with a gathering of friends and an exchange of rings. They exchanged vows privately that first summer while sitting in their car under the prairie night.

"We asked the blessing of the spirit above," Hanson said. "It was a pretty final thing."

At first blush, they seem an unlikely couple.

"Bert the scholar and Dick the activist... In some ways they're just worlds apart," Stackpool said. "But politics brought them together, and now they take delight in those differences and in their special traits. They've figured out things many married couples never come close to figuring out."

Henningson is bookish and intense, a Ph.D. in international trade, a professor and essayist. He is a doer and organizer. He charts the monthly household budget on his Apple computer, itemizing everything from mortgage payments to medicine to cat food. He sets a hearty dinner table, which is cleared and washed as soon as the last bit of food is gone. He buries himself in his work during the week, becomes reclusive when he retreats to the farm on weekends and has worked hard over the years to control an explosive temper.

Hanson is more social, an easygoing, non-stop talker with a starburst of interests. He spent 12 years detouring through social activism before finally earning a bachelor's degree in political science at the university's Morris campus. He has a political junkie's memory for names, dates and events, thrills in company and is quick to offer refreshments, having inherited his mother's belief in friendship through food.

But they also have much in common.

Henningson, 40, grew up on a farm near Graceville, in neighboring Big Stone County. His life paralleled Hanson's in many respects: the radical farm movement,

anti-war protests, involvement in liberal political campaigns.

Both suppressed their homosexuality until they were almost 30. Hanson kept so active with politics and the farm that he didn't have time for a social life. After acknowledging his homosexuality, his sexual life involved weekend excursions to the Twin Cities for anonymous encounters at the gay bathhouse.

"I had to taste all the fruit in the orchard," he said. "I had some real special relationships, but if they suggested it just be us I felt trapped, like they were closing in on me."

Henningson threw himself into graduate school, tried marriage and took on a demanding career in Washington, D.C., as an aide to former U.S. Rep. Richard Nolan. He divorced and returned to Minnesota, where he enrolled in a human sexuality program at the University of Minnesota. He had three homosexual involvements before meeting Hanson at a political convention.

"There were some major forces working in the universe that were compelling us together," Henningson said. "I don't know that we even had much to say about it. I've always believed in serendipity, but I also feel you have to give serendipity a little help. So I didn't sit back and wait for Dick to call — I called him."

Any doubts Hanson had about their relationship were squelched by his mother. She visited the farmhouse one Sunday morning with freshly baked caramel rolls, which she served Hanson and Henningson in bed. Henningson was accepted as part of the family, moved to the farm and eventually assumed financial responsibility for the family's farm operations.

"It was so good to work together, to sweat together, to farrow those sows and help the sows have those little piglets," Henningson said. "We literally worked dawn to dusk."

That hard but somewhat idyllic life has been altered drastically by AIDS. Hanson does what he can, when he can, perhaps baking cookies or doing the laundry. But the burden of earning an income, running the house and caring for Hanson has fallen heavily on Henningson's shoulders.

Hanson's medical bills — totalling more than \$50,000 so far — are covered by welfare. Henningson's temporary job at the state Department of Agriculture, where he writes farm policy proposals, pays their personal bills, helps pay their apartment rent in the Twin Cities so Hanson can be near medical care during the week and allows them to keep the farmhouse.

"Dick's optimism is fine," Henningson said. "But you have to help optimism along now and then with a little spade work. I ended up doing all of the work with

no help. What could have happened is that I could have grown resentful and blamed the victim.

"But I tried to put myself in his shoes — having pneumonia twice — and with all my anger and short temper, could I live with that? Could I even get through that? I'd probably have the strength to go to a field and dig a hole and when the time came crawl in and bury myself. But I don't know if I'd have the strength to do what he did."

So, their commitment to each other remains absolute, perhaps strengthened by facing a crisis together.

"When you know that some body's going to stand by you, and when they prove that they will, when they go through what Bert's gone through this past year in putting up with me ... you just know it's very, very special what you have," Hanson said.

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Each week, Hanson checks in at the AIDS clinic at Hennepin County Medical Center. He and Henningson make the three-hour drive to Minneapolis every Monday and spend their week in the Twin Cities. Henningson has work through June at the Agriculture Department. Hanson's full-time job is AIDS.

He has his blood tested to determine his white blood cell count his body's natural defense system. It often is below 1,000; a healthy person's count would be closer to 5,000.

He has a physical exam, chats with two or three doctors, gives encouragement to fellow patients and collects hugs from the nursing staff. He is a favorite with the social workers, who tease him about his lack of interest in the women who flock to his examination room each week for a visit.

He does weekly inhalation therapy, breathing an antibiotic into his lungs to ward off the dreaded pneumonia. Then he buses to St. Paul for a long, healing massage from one of several local massage therapists who donate time to AIDS patients.

Thursday mornings find him at the University of Minnesota Hospital and Clinic for eye treatments. Doctors inject medicine directly into his eyeball to thwart a virus that is attacking his vision. Sometimes the needle punctures a blood vessel, leaving Hanson with bright red patches in his eyes.

On Thursday nights, he and Henningson attend an AIDS support group meeting, where as many as 30 patients, relatives and friends gather to share comfort and information.

For eight months, Hanson has taken AZT, or azidothymidine, an experimental drug believed to prolong life for AIDS sufferers. He takes other drugs to counter the nausea caused by AZT's high toxicity, and he is watched closely for bone marrow suppression.

He uses various underground treatments, all with his doctor's knowledge. He rubs solvent on his skin to try to stimulate a response from his immune system, and spreads a home-brewed cholesterol agent on his toast, hoping it will help render the virus inert.

He watches his diet to prevent diarrhea and takes various prescription drugs for depression and anxiety.

His spare time, what there is of it, is devoured by long waits for the bus or slow walks to his various appointments. He naps often to keep his energy level up and spends evenings watching the Twins on TV. Reading has become painful for him, straining his eyes and making him dizzy.

"It comes back and back and back many times," he said. "Is this my total life? Has the illness become such an all-encompassing thing that my life will never be judged by anything but this brand of AIDS?"

Weekends are spent on the farm, where Hanson often can be found kneeling in his flowerbeds. The impatiens, moss roses and sweet Williams are planted especially thick this summer; Hanson was eager to see their cheerful pinks and reds cover the crumbling stone foundation of the old farmhouse. He insists on having fresh flowers in the house every day, even dandelions and thistles. Once, after pranksters broke the peony bushes in the church cemetery, Hanson gathered up the broken blossoms and took them home, placing them around the house in shallow bowls of water.

Or he can be found singing in the empty silo, practicing hymns for Sunday's church service. His voice is sweet and natural, with a good range. It is inherited, he says, from his mother, who sang to him when he was in the womb and tuned in opera on the radio in the farm kitchen when he was a youngster. He has sung for his brothers' weddings but is better, he says, at funerals.

On hot summer nights, he and Henningson sleep in twin beds in a screened porch upstairs. The room is kept cool by towering shade trees and constant breezes blowing off the marsh that winds in front of the house. From there, the men note the comings and goings of their neighbors: egrets and blue herons, Canada geese that feed on what Henningson calls Green Scum Pond, a doe and her buff-colored fawn. There is an owl in the nearby woods, a peregrine falcon nesting in the farmhouse eaves and an unseen loon that sings to them at dusk.

If the weekend is slow, the weather is mild and his energy is high, Hanson can be found in a dinghy somewhere on Lake Minnewaska, the sparkling centerpiece of Pope County. He's a skilled fisherman, and remembers weekends when he would haul home a catch of 200 pan fish for one of his mother's famous fries.

"I find that going out in the garden is a good way

to get away from things, or going fishing, or just visiting with people and talking," he said. "I don't want my whole life to be branded by AIDS."

■ ■ ■

Hanson awakes in the Minneapolis apartment on a recent morning to the sound of his mother's voice.

"It wasn't part of any dream," he said. "Just her voice, crystal clear, calling."

He has been running a fever for several days and suffering headaches. His white blood cell count has dropped precipitously. His chatter, usually cheerful, is tinged with fear.

"I got pretty emotional about it," he said. "But Bert held me and said, 'Don't be afraid. Don't fight it.' And I remember a year ago when I was so sick, and she was reaching to me, and I was so scared I was almost pushing her away. And Bert said not to fight it, to let her comfort me even if she's reaching to me on a level we don't understand. ..."

"There are days I think I'm just going to get out of this, put this whole thing behind me and get a job and go on with my life again. Then I have a rough day like this and I have to look at things much more realistically."

Hanson seldom talks of death. When his health is stable, there seems little point. He has beaten the odds before and will, he says, again.

"Intermittently, there has been some denial," said his physician, Dr. Margaret Simpson, director of the sexually transmitted disease clinic at Hennepin County Medical Center. "That's not too surprising. When you're feeling good, it's easy to think this isn't true."

"But he's deteriorating again, and it's worrisome. I don't make predictions, but I think now in terms of weeks and months rather than months and years."

Hanson senses that urgency. But he remains a fighter. His attitude, he says, is not one of delusion but of defiance.

"I think I'll know when the time is right and it's coming," he said. "Should it be, I'm ready to meet my maker. But I'm not ready to give up and say there's nothing that will turn around so I can live."

A week later, Hanson is in the hospital. The headaches are worse, and doctors do a painful spinal tap to determine if the AIDS virus has entered his brain. His white blood cell count is dangerously low, but a transfusion is too risky.

It is the first hospitalization in six months, and only an overnight stay for tests, but it evokes painful memories of the past and fears for the future.

Henningson telephones Hanson's sister.

"I told Mary it may be only three or four months and we have to respond to him accordingly," he said. "Not treat him as someone who's going to die, but

accord him the time and attention you want. We can't just say, 'See you next week.' It's not a matter of dealing with certitude anymore, but a great deal of uncertainty about where it's going to lead."

Hanson is quiet this evening and seems distracted. The Twins game plays silently on the hospital room TV, but relief pitcher Jeff Reardon is losing and Hanson pays only passing interest. He gets up once during the evening to vomit and occasionally presses his hand to his temple. But he never mentions the nausea, the throbbing headache or the pain from the spinal tap.

Henningson sits next to him on the bed and thumbs through their photo album, recalling lighter times. Suddenly, Hanson waves his hand vaguely, at the room, at his life. "I'll miss all this," he confided. "I'll just miss all these wonderful people."

Then he and Henningson discuss — gently — the logistics of his death. Should he be placed in a nursing home if he becomes invalid? Should life-sustaining measures be used if he falls into a coma again? Should he donate his body to research?

The morbid conversation is held in matter-of-fact tones and seems to soothe Hanson. It is Henningson's way of pulling out the emotions, the soft rage and futility that Hanson otherwise would keep tucked inside.

"Talking about things like that helps you understand your mortality, that it may not be much longer," Henningson said. "And that helps relieve your fears. Dick's fears are not so much for himself as for me. Will I live out here all by myself? Will I find someone else? I say don't worry about that, it's out of your control."

But Henningson, too, is shaken. He sits at the window next to Hanson's hospital bed, and holds his hand. Finally, he abandons the diversionary talk and cries. He is worried about losing the farm, about the political hassles involved in getting housing assistance, about getting a job after his contract with the state expires, about not having enough time left with Hanson.

And he can't help but worry about the AIDS virus in his body and his own health prospects. Although he guards his health carefully and is optimistic about medical progress on the AIDS front, he fears that the stress of caring for Hanson is taking its toll. He watches Hanson, and wonders if he is watching his own future.

Then he comforts himself with a wish.

"I want to be cremated and have my ashes thrown in Big Stone Lake. And from there I would flow to the Minnesota River, down to the Mississippi River, all the way to the Gulf. And I'll hit the Gulf Stream and travel the world.

"And I told Dick if he'd like to be cremated, they

could put him in Lake Minnewaska, and he would flow to the Chippewa River and then into the Minnesota and the Mississippi and to the Gulf and around the world. And at some point we would merge and we'd be together forever."

He stops, perhaps embarrassed.

"You can't control what happens to people after they're dead," he said. "But even if it doesn't happen, it's a lovely, consoling thought."

CHAPTER II — July 12, 1987

Dick Hanson used to talk about being the first to survive AIDS; now he talks about surviving another week.

After a year-long battle with acquired immune deficiency syndrome, the Glenwood, Minn., farmer's health is deteriorating rapidly.

"We talk about holding on," said Bert Henningson, Hanson's partner of five years, who also carries the AIDS virus. "But we have to recognize what may be reality and prepare ourselves for it."

The funeral arrangements are checked and rechecked. Visits from family and friends take on more urgency. Precious moments alone, just Hanson and Henningson, are guarded and savored. Where once Hanson threw himself into radical political activism, he now hoards his dwindling strength.

Hanson has taken his battle with AIDS to the public, exposing his own dreams and despairs so that others will feel less alone. He wants others to learn from his loss. But the spotlight on Hanson is harsh, and sometimes catches unwilling players in its glare—relatives who would rather bear their grief in private, others who are angered and embarrassed by their connection with him and some who want no part of him at all.

"This whole illness is a test of humanity, of how we treat our fellow human beings," Hanson said. "If we do the leper thing, and put people away, that's one judgment. But if we do everything we can to give comfort and hope and try to find a cure, that's another judgment."

Chapter Two of Hanson's story is about that test of humanity.

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Growing up, the men were like twins. Dick Hanson is barely a year younger than his brother Grant. They shared farm chores; Dick was a patient milker and had a gentle way with the animals, while Grant was a tinkerer who kept the machinery tuned and responsive.

They double-dated in high school, although the socializing never seemed to hold much interest for Dick. They even looked alike, with the same sandy hair that turned lighter in the sun.

"He looks different now, of course," Grant Hanson

said. At 38, Grant Hanson is sturdy from years of physical labor. His hair and beard are bleached from the summer, and his face carries a warm, healthy tan.

But Dick Hanson, 37, is wasting away from AIDS. His frail body is a sallow white, his skin seems translucent, his hair and beard have thinned and turned dark. He bears little resemblance to the ruddy, full-faced man who stands side-by-side with Grant and other relatives in family photographs.

And appearance isn't all that has changed because of AIDS.

Although Grant Hanson remains close to his brother and checks regularly on his condition, AIDS has created an unwelcome barrier between them. "There's a paranoia about AIDS," Grant Hanson said. "Some people are certain the AIDS virus will live on a doorknob for days on end or you'll catch AIDS from mosquitoes. My wife is very fearful of the disease."

As a result of that fear, Grant Hanson's five children, ages 2 to 12, haven't been allowed to spend time with their Uncle Dick since he became seriously ill last fall. The family has visited the farm only once in recent months; the children stayed in the car while Dick Hanson chatted with them through an open window.

Dick Hanson seldom speaks of such rifts. He prefers to focus on the many kindnesses shown him by family and friends, and to dismiss any unpleasanties, blaming them on misinformation rather than maliciousness.

But he mentioned it recently at an AIDS education seminar in nearby Starbuck, when someone in the audience quoted a Christian radio doctor who said AIDS could be spread by casual contact.

"Because of things like that, I have five nieces and nephews who I can't see, who used to love to come out to the farm and enjoy being with Bert and me and doing things with us," Hanson said. "For a year now they haven't been allowed to do that. And it's one of the things I have missed most in the last year — getting to know these young people — and it has hurt me deeply. I can only hope it will change."

■ ■ ■

Hanson has become one of Minnesota's most visible AIDS patients, trying to educate others about the disease. That visibility has carried a price.

Some of his relatives have been hassled by gossip, letter-writers have accused him of flaunting his homosexuality, and a few family members are furious with him for holding the Hanson name up to public scrutiny.

But, on the whole, Glenwood and Minnesota are passing Hanson's test of humanity.

"You have to deal with so many different aspects of life when you're dealing with this, you're bound to run

into some resistance or ignorance," Hanson said. "There are simple-minded people, and I don't bother to waste my time with them. But by and large, people are caring and giving and compassionate if given a chance."

Hanson says he expected no less, although he and Henningson knew they risked rejection by making their situation public. They have been featured in news stories and have spoken at AIDS education forums across the state and at the Minnesota Legislature.

"Our friends told us we were crazy, that we'd be lynched and branded by the hysterics," Hanson said. "But we had to balance that off with what we see as our part of it, what I like to think is the truth."

The slurs that come to him third-hand are more than offset by the favors he receives directly.

He and Henningson recently received a \$50 check from strangers—two closeted gay men from Minneapolis who heard about them and wanted to help. Other strangers have sent smaller amounts — \$5 or \$10 — or invaluable words of encouragement. A friend from the Glenwood area called Henningson last week to offer her savings if they needed it.

Neighbors sometimes mow the lawn, and others stop by to leave food in the freezer. Pearl Brosvick, Hanson's neighbor and godmother, brings rhubarb pie on the weekends and homemade doughnuts like those Hanson's mother made.

Brosvick, a childless 73-year-old widow, also sent Hanson a note last winter thanking him for escorting her to communion at Chippewa Falls Lutheran Church. Area residents had just received the news that Hanson had AIDS.

"I don't know that much about AIDS," she said. "And I don't really approve of homosexuality. I don't know if they're born this way and they can't function any other way.

"But we all do things we shouldn't and we can't judge each other."

Several local ministers have risked the wrath of their congregations by supporting Hanson. The Rev. Wayne Mensing of Immanuel and Indherred Lutheran churches in Starbuck urged people at an AIDS seminar to "take a stand and see these people as children of God and be with them in community." And the Rev. Marlin Johnson of Trinity Lutheran Church in Cyrus thanked Hanson and Henningson for sharing their story.

"Whether you agree or disagree or approve or disapprove is irrelevant," Johnson said. "This is such a big problem, you can't go running away off into the boondocks as if it didn't exist. If God can work good out of evil, then we are being blessed by these two fellows because they are so willing to be vocal about it."

Hanson cherishes such comments, little signs that people are listening and learning.

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"I am so proud of this rural community," he said. "I think in the - big cities it's very easy to get lost in the shuffle and impersonal aspect of the thing. But in the rural area, if you've given to the community all your life as I have, there's a level of decency. If a farmer gets sick or his barn burns down, the neighbors get together and bring food. There's a time to come together, even if you don't like the person, no matter what the differences. "Not a lot of people understand or agree with my lifestyle, but they understand that sense of coming together and that sense of community. That, for me, makes life worth living."

■ ■ ■

Allen Hanson, 69, drives out to the farmhouse on a recent night to visit his son. They talk of the usual things—the family, the failing farm economy, their mutual dream of someday seeing Jesse Jackson in the White House.

But as he prepares to leave, Allen Hanson tells a strange story, about an age gone by when his own father was dying of inoperable cancer, and about a faith healer who came to town and called upon God, and how doctors later saved his father. And about a time when Allen Hanson himself was sick, stricken with gallstones, and the faith healer again called upon God, and the stones passed and he finally was freed of pain.

Allen Hanson stops his story and looks at his son, lying still as death on the couch. "I just know if I could find someone like that," he said, "they could help the doctors and take away this illness of yours."

Dick Hanson stands up then, mustering a strength he hasn't felt for days, and clasps his father's hand in both of his. They stay that way for a long, awkward moment — two proud Norwegian farmers who seldom shared a handshake in all the years they shared a life.

Before letting go of his hand, Dick Hanson tells his father how good it is to see him, and how much he appreciates his concern.

■ ■ ■

It was the first time Allen Hanson had spoken with his son, even obliquely, about AIDS.

"We never discussed it," the elder Hanson said. "I can't explain why. ... I don't believe in this crying and everything. You got to take the good with the bad in life."

He sits this evening in the living room of a modest rambler near downtown Glenwood, where he moved after losing much of the family's century-old farm to foreclosure and selling the rest to his sons in an attempt to salvage the homestead.

He lives there with two of his five sons, Leland and Tom, and with Leland's wife and teenage daughter. Allen Hanson's only daughter, Mary Hanson-Jenniges,

has walked over from her nearby apartment, and son Grant stops by on his bicycle. Allen Hanson's oldest son, John, lives with his family in Brooten, some 25 miles away.

It is an uncomfortable evening for Allen Hanson. He seems pleased by the company, but troubled by the conversation. He says he is confused about the strange and frightening disease that has attacked Dick, his third child, and that has fractured his family.

Allen Hanson says he never thought much about his son being gay, that it didn't really matter. Nor does he mind that Dick Hanson has taken his homosexuality and his fight with AIDS public. None of the townsfolk have said anything to him about it and, if they do, he's used to controversy.

As one of the first farmers in the area to try contour plowing, he was ridiculed by traditionalists who "probably thought I'd been drinking." As an early leader of the radical National Farmers Organization, he alienated neighbors who belonged to the conservative Farm Bureau.

But this issue is different, beyond Allen Hanson's understanding or control. "I'm sitting here thinking of what the heck I done wrong," he said. "The last year I lost everything I got ... the farm, my wife, everything."

He doesn't mention Dick directly in the litany of loss. But he spreads the family photo albums on his lap, pointing out the prouder times, the times that made more sense. Rather than talk about the son who is gay and dying of AIDS, he talks about the son who was, like him, a promising farmer and avid fisherman.

"Those pictures in there, years ago, he was built real good," he said. "He was strong. He could handle those bales like a good, healthy person, and he had good arms on him."

"And I can't help but think of the fun Dickie and I had fishing on this lake. We caught some fish there, I tell you ... Dickie and I haven't fished together for a couple years."

He talks of the time Jesse Jackson visited Glenwood and drank some of his wife's good coffee, and the time he rode with the WCCO-TV helicopter to cover a story in the area. He brings out his daughter's wedding picture and many of the awards he won as a young farmer—anything to keep the conversation on safe, pleasant terrain.

But the anguish that has torn his family apart is not to be mended by nostalgia. Allen Hanson's memories are lost beneath the squabbling voices of his children — voices of grief, anger and resentment.

"You can't understand what this is doing to us as a family," Tom Hanson said. "It split us, big time."

The children — Dick Hanson's four brothers and one sister—share their stories reluctantly. Each has

been touched by AIDS in varying degrees and ways, depending on their ties to their brother. Their positions polarized after Hanson's story was aired on Alexandria television in April and, more recently, was covered by Twin Cities newspapers and TV stations. Between Hanson's avid crusade for AIDS education and the fishbowl existence of small-town living, they are robbed of the luxury of private emotions.

So they talk, some out of compassion for other families visited by AIDS, some out of a simple desire to support their brother, some out of a need to distance themselves from him, some out of anger at him for bringing his suffering — and its accompanying stigma — home.

Dick Hanson is painfully aware of the family's turmoil, but if he has criticisms or conflicts, he keeps them to himself.

"But I can't shelter people from reality," he said. "Even the people you love the most, sometimes you have to hurt them. I have to do what I think is right."

Tom Hanson, 28, is the youngest of Dick Hanson's brothers, a big, brusque man who family members say is prone to outbursts of rage. He lives in his father's house in town, having sold his dairy herd as part of a government buy-out. He still grows crops on 190 acres of the family's farmstead.

"Dickie helped me get the farm, the one thing I've always wanted," he said. "It's just like a twist in my stomach. It hurts because he helped me so much. But just because somebody does something good ... Every day something happens and I get madder and madder and madder."

Tom Hanson is angry at Dick Hanson for making news of such a shameful disease, at his sister, Mary, for siding with Dick, at his brother Grant because "he's not man enough" to say that homosexuality is wrong, at a local minister for refusing to denounce homosexuality from the pulpit, at the media for exploiting his family.

"I feel Dickie is helping the public by talking about this," he said. "But he could have done it without bringing his name into it or his picture or the town. This is not fair what he's doing to the family ... It's not easy being single trying to go through this, having girls come up and say, 'His brother's gay and he has AIDS. Is he gay, too?'"

"At least I'm polite enough to call them 'gays.' And I still respected Dickie as my brother for years after I found out he was that way. I've always been nice to Dickie. When he came out of the hospital, he said he'd like to go ice fishing. So I moved the icehouse closer to shore and drilled some holes for him and I tried to be nice. And in return, the favor I get back is he comes on TV without consulting all the family, with no consideration what it'd be like in a small town. He never

stopped to think of the innocent people who would be suffering for his glory."

He is cut short by his sister. The two haven't spoken for weeks, their relationship strained by her steadfast loyalty to Dick.

"Can I ask you one question?" Mary Hanson-Jenniges is near tears, her voice low and controlled. "Have you thought about what life will be like without Dick? What will you complain about when he's gone?"

She is 32, has a degree in psychology from St. Cloud State University and works as a social service director at a Glenwood nursing home. She lived at Dick Hanson's farm for a time before she was married, and later she and her husband were frequent visitors with their lively daughter, now 2.

The baby no longer goes to the farm for fear she'll pass some childhood illness on to her uncle. Hanson-Jenniges often cooks for her brother, making meals from their mother's recipes—glorified rice and custard and other bland foods that Hanson can digest.

"As a result of my supporting Dick I've been shunned by some of the family," she said. "I probably would have felt more comfortable if he had not been public, because I'm more a private person. I can't say I don't worry about what people think, because I do. But I'm proud that Dick is my brother and has the courage to stand up and do what he does.

"In the family, I was the first to know. I went through a mourning period when he told me. I cried arid cried and cried. I figured that was the worst thing that could ever happen to me. Then three weeks later my mom died.

"And for a while, there were probably a couple of months where I hadn't adjusted to Mom's death, I almost felt angry at Dick for having AIDS. I just lost Mom and now the next most important person in the world may leave me, too. I think Grant is hurting inside just like I am right now. You start grieving before somebody's gone."

Grant Hanson is a quiet man who observes the rest of the family's emotion without comment, refusing to be drawn into the fray. "At this point in time, everybody's got their mind pretty well set," he said. "Being mad doesn't change anything."

Grant, a mechanic and a veteran of the U.S. Navy Seabees, is routinely tested for AIDS twice a year when he gives blood and reads everything he can about the disease. AIDS is his concern, he says, not people sexual preferences.

"If there's truly a body chemistry so that there's a sexual desire in Dick for another man equal to mine for a woman, then I can understand that," he said.

Grant Hanson is careful not to say too much; he wants to protect his own family's privacy as much as

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possible. But he acknowledges that his affection for Dick Hanson is at odds with his wife's fear of AIDS, and their five children are caught in the middle.

"My desire would be that between what they hear at home and what they hear from the hygiene types at school, they'll make wise choices," he said. "It reaches a point where you let go of them on the bicycle, and it reaches a point where you can't control everything they do. You just hope they'll carry on what you've tried to teach them.

"And you pray for the people with AIDS. They say there is no cure, that the likelihood of a cure in this century is next to nil, so you just pray for time."

Leland Hanson, the fourth son, is 35 and unemployed. His wife works as a medical secretary and they are active in a Lutheran church in Sunberg. He says he is a recovering alcoholic; if he can overcome his desire for alcohol, he believes his brother can overcome his desire for homosexual relations.

"You look at where the gays were marching in the streets, and right in the Bible it says you'll die and your blood will be upon you," he said. "And AIDS is now in the blood. God will take that for just so long. He's still in control and now they're dying and there's not a damn thing we can do about it.

"If I was given a 95 percent chance of dying, and I'm dying from a sin that I committed, and God gave me another chance to live, I'd be hollering at the top of my lungs that this is wrong. But that's not what he did. God didn't give him a second chance so he could splatter his name across the paper.

"I went down to my church and the first two people I met said, 'Is Dick Hanson your brother?' And I walked away. Enough is enough."

John Hanson, 43, is the oldest and, he says, "the mediator between the whole bunch." Because he lives in another town, he is less entangled in family politics. He is a part-time farmer who buys hay and straw from area farmers and hauls it to dairy operations and to the racetrack in Shakopee. He sees Dick Hanson every few weeks when he brings his two teenage sons to the farm to do chores.

"I feel sorry for him. He seems to be a fairly good person. He's always been real nice to my family.

"But I wish they just wouldn't have so much publicity. We got kids in school and there's always some who pick on them, and this is an excuse. Down in the Cities, there's this gay business going on and they don't think too much of it. But up here in the small communities, it becomes a big deal.

"There are a few who ask, 'Are you related to that guy up in Glenwood?' My sons tell them we're not related."

■ ■ ■

There is talk. In a town like Glenwood, population 2,500, there is bound to be.

Much of the talk is rumor and unfounded, based on fears about AIDS and how it is spread.

Like the time Mary Hanson-Jenniges was chatting with a nursing home official from a neighboring county. He mentioned there was an AIDS patient in Pope County who died last winter. He was speaking of Dick Hanson.

Or the time Hanson-Jenniges was asked by a colleague if, because of her brother, she had been tested for AIDS. Flabbergasted, she didn't answer. But when a second person asked her the same question, she was ready.

"No, I haven't," she said. "I don't have sex with my brother or share needles with him."

But it is mostly just talk.

"Dick's problem hasn't been a big community issue," said John Stone, owner and editor of the local weekly newspaper, the *Pope County Tribune*. There has been no coverage of Hanson's illness or his public speeches in the Tribune.

"Dick has not been a real active member of this community for many, many years, and a lot of people have no idea who he is," Stone said. "I'm not sure people understand a person like him, who puts issues ahead of his own personal life. He's a crusader of sorts."

"The community interest is zip," agreed Gary Wenschlag, principal of Glenwood High School. "Most people feel he's just one of those weird people and they're not going to deal with it. It's like any other issue ... a few get right in the middle of it and the rest stay home and mow their lawns and go on about their lives."

Wenschlag spoke to a group of junior high school students about AIDS in April after Hanson's niece, a seventh-grader, left school for half a day when she was teased about him.

"Kids were teasing her that she had AIDS and that her uncle was a sexual pervert and things like that," he said. "The focus was more on the sexuality of it than on AIDS.

"So I told them to think of it from their perspective — maybe you, have an uncle, or brother or someone who isn't exactly the person you might want them to be. And I tried to clarify the issue. She has an uncle who's gay; that's a fact. And he has AIDS; that's a fact. And when you go into the ninth grade, he'll be dead. That sounds pretty brutal, but that's the way it is and we need to confront that."

Hanson's presence has forced other townspeople to confront AIDS, too. He has been admitted without question at Glenwood's Glacial Ridge Hospital, although the medical staff wore gowns, gloves and masks when treating him — something that seldom

occurs in Twin Cities hospitals except when doctors or nurses are drawing blood.

“People may have been a little skittish at first, but no one refused to treat him,” said Sharon Larson, the hospital’s director of nursing.

Hanson’s family dentist cleared his calendar of patients to accommodate Hanson’s need for dental work one day last year — and to avoid any panic among other clients. He continues to check on Hanson’s health, and has offered to work Saturdays, if necessary, to treat Hanson. But he asked that his name not be published because he fears he will lose business if townspeople know he is treating an AIDS patient.

Local health officials capitalized on the curiosity surrounding Hanson by organizing AIDS education seminars in Glenwood and neighboring Starbuck that drew, combined, about 250 people. Hanson and Henningson were invited to tell their stories.

At the Glenwood seminar, a Baptist minister raised biblical objections to homosexuality, but was quieted by a Catholic priest who turned the conversation back to the topic — AIDS.

Some members of Barsness Lutheran Church, the tiny country church Hanson has attended since birth, were concerned about sharing communion wine with him. With Hanson’s consent, the Rev. Carl Listug provided Hanson with a disposable plastic cup. Since then, Hanson has been welcomed warmly at the church, and has been asked to sing a solo when he is feeling well enough.

“Here is someone who was baptized in the church and grew up in the church and was confirmed in the church,” Listug said. “We’re not going to turn our backs on him now and have nothing to do with him because he’s a homosexual and has AIDS. There’s a history there.”

■ ■ ■

Pastor Listug has been the minister of Barsness Lutheran Church for 18 years and has come to know the Hanson family well — burying, baptizing and marrying many of them. His parsonage is just down the gravel road from Dick Hanson’s farm. Hanson used to teach Sunday school at the church, and Listug was a kind listener when Hanson struggled with his decision to be a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War.

So when Hanson was first hospitalized with AIDS last year, Listug paid a requisite visit.

“When I left the hospital, I realized I hadn’t shaken his hand,” he said. Listug’s reluctance to touch Hanson forced him to face his own fears about AIDS.

“And I worked through that, and the way I came out of it was I’m not going to let that fear prevent me from ministering to Dick.”

The next time Listug was called to Hanson’s

bedside, he made a point of taking the dying man’s hand.

Since then, the minister has attended church-sponsored seminars about AIDS and homosexuality, trying to learn as much as he can so he can guide his congregation in their response to AIDS and its victims. He has preached about AIDS from the pulpit, encouraging compassion and acceptance.

“To me, this is a ministry issue and it doesn’t mean that I approve of his whole lifestyle,” Listug said. “The focus is on ministering to Dick, who has AIDS.”

For those in the congregation who might be discomfited by Hanson’s homosexuality and by the publicity he is receiving, the pastor offers some biblical wisdom, specifically, from the Book of Matthew.

“Matthew 7 said ‘Judge not that you will not be judged,’” he said. “And in Matthew 9 and 10, Jesus was eating with sinners. He takes the risk of reaching out to people, even though the Pharisees are worried about their image.

“So if someone demanded that Dick not receive communion or not be allowed in church, I would say, ‘Do you want me to abandon him? We’re all sinners; the rest of us need grace, too.’

Listug’s approach is at odds with the Rev. Merrill Olson, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Glenwood.

“According to the Bible, homosexuality is wrong, an abomination unto the Lord,” Olson said. “So a person who is homosexual and has AIDS has to realize the spiritual consequences of it, meaning they have to repent of it.

“So many churches and pastors override that whole issue. They say, ‘We’ll love them no matter what they’ve done.’ But if we say we love them and accept them in spite of what they’re doing, that’s totally wrong.”

Olson says Hanson would be welcome to worship in his church, but would not be allowed to receive communion until he repented of the sin of homosexuality.

Olson has purchased space in the *Pope County Tribune* to make his point, and spoke out against Hanson’s homosexuality at the AIDS seminar in Glenwood. He objects to the promotion of condoms and safe sex in the war against AIDS, saying it is “treating the sin” rather than stopping it.

“As long as behavior doesn’t change, we’ll have AIDS and premarital sex and homosexuality and all kinds of debauchery and every immoral thing you can think of,” Olson said.

Listug is aware of Olson’s comments, and those of his other critics, and of the moral dilemma posed by AIDS.

But he again turns to Matthew, this time paraphrased on his favorite poster. It shows a starving

child in dirty, tattered clothing, and carries the caption: "I was hungry and you debated the morality of my appearance."

"We can get into an academic thing of debating the morality of the issue instead of seeing the human being before us," Listug said.

■ ■ ■

The lush vegetable garden is overgrown and untended. Weeds poke through the thick straw mulch. The spinach and lettuce long ago flowered and turned bitter, before Henningson had a chance to harvest them. The other crops are ripening quickly under the humid summer sun — fat cabbages, gleaming white cauliflower and crisp broccoli, juicy peas and sweet strawberries. The raspberries are almost done for the season, and the tomatoes will redden soon.

"I found with the garden I don't have time to process it this year," Henningson said. "So I'm giving it away, all of it. Alice and John were here last Sunday and filled up their buckets with raspberries and I gave some cauliflower and broccoli to Mary."

He sits on the crumbled concrete stoop of the old farmhouse, looking at the garden that has been his pride and joy for the five years he has lived here with Hanson. Last summer, after Hanson fell ill, they named the Hope Garden and look to it as a symbol of Hanson's stubborn will to survive.

"I find I just love to look at it," Henningson said. "I'll have to tell Dick there's a scarlet gladiolus on the way. He got those for his birthday. Two people gave him bags of gladioli bulbs and two people gave him begonias."

Hanson is asleep inside, on the couch in the front room. It is cool there, and blessedly quiet after the noise and smells of the Twin Cities, where Henningson works during the week while Hanson undergoes medical treatment.

It is Hanson's first visit to the farm in almost a month. He was hospitalized at Hennepin County Medical Center three times in June, for 13 days.

The garden has become a luxury for him, as have visits from friends and his beloved Minnesota Twins games. Watching the TV makes him dizzy. And he's been so exhausted he chose not to attend an annual Fourth of July party at the nearby lake home of Alice Tripp, a longtime friend and fellow political activist.

Dozens of friends would be there — compatriots who stood with him to try to block construction of the West Central power line, who campaigned with him for liberal Democratic candidates and who were arrested with him in farm foreclosure protests. ,

The party would have had special meaning this year: It marked the fifth anniversary of the night Hanson and Henningson exchanged private vows of

commitment to each other, asking God to be their witness.

But Hanson and Henningson stayed home. "It would just be too hard to pull away from people and say goodbye," Hanson said. His melancholy is softened some by two red roses, given him that morning by Henningson to celebrate their years together. Hanson places them nearby so they catch his eye whenever he awakes from his frequent naps."

It is little things that tax him now. He suffered severe and unexplained headaches in early June. Doctors tried a host of pain-relieving medicines, but they only caused nausea and a dangerous loss of weight. They finally settled on methadone treatments and the headaches are less painful, but Hanson still cannot digest solid food.

Two weeks ago, an abscessed tooth had to be removed. The Novocain didn't take effect, but oral surgeons cut through the jawbone and pulled the tooth anyway, fearing that Hanson's weakened immune system would not be able to fight the infection by itself. Henningson left the building rather than listen to Hanson's screams. Hanson merely said: "It was the most unpleasant thing I've dealt with in a year-and-a-half with AIDS."

But Dick Hanson remains a fighter, struggling to maintain his weight — which has again dropped below 120 — on a diet of Jell-O, Carnation Instant Breakfast and a chocolate-flavored protein drink. He still cherishes the quiet and fresh air of the farm, and watches the news each night with the avid interest of a lifelong political junkie. And he counts his small victories, like making it upstairs by himself to shower or spending a few minutes on the stoop looking at the garden.

■ ■ ■

"I'm really thankful I've had the last six months," Hanson said. "The doctors gave up on me six months ago and I was in a very low physical condition. So I'm really thankful for all the things I've been able to do, all the speaking engagements, and talking at the Capitol. Maybe this is the purpose, maybe I was given this extra time in December so I could inspire the Legislature and the public through the media.

"The last couple of days in the hospital, and then here at home, I seem to have sensed spirits in the room, like people around me. The presence has been so real when I open my eyes up I expect to see them, and possibly I ... see the vague framework of someone.

"It seems they were there to comfort me and seems real natural with the environment. Mom was one of them, I know. The others I don't recognize. But I never knew my grandmothers. They died before I was born. So there are people in the family tree who would be

concerned who I don't know.

"It's been scary in the past when I've felt the spirits. But this time it was a good feeling. Except maybe it means the time is closer for me to leave this world, and that always brings sad tears, to think of missing my friends and Bert and my family. But I guess it's kind of nice to know there is some kind of warning or signal, too, so if there's something I want to say or do before I leave ... like telling Bert how much I love him..."

"Bert and I had a talk last night. He kind of prodded me like he does when he knows I need to talk. We talked about the time left, and he probed my wishes for a service, if it would be soon. He wanted to know if I had any changes in my mind for the plans we had talked about earlier."

He turns to Henningson then, trying to remember. "By the way, what did I say?"

"You left it up to me," Henningson answered.

Hanson shakes his head. "I left it up to you," he said. "Typical me ... when there are tough choices to make, leave it up to Bert."

Then, Hanson laughs, a surprisingly deep and healthy laugh.

THE FINAL CHAPTER—Aug. 9, 1987

Dick Hanson died Saturday, July 25 at 5:30 a.m. Farmers' time, when the night holds tight to a last few moments of quiet before surrendering to the bustle of the day.

Back home in rural Glenwood, Minn., folks were finishing morning barn chores before heading out to the fields for the early wheat harvest. Members of the Pope County DFL Party were setting up giant barbecue grills in Barsness Park, preparing for the Waterama celebration at Lake Minnewaska.

In the 37 years Hanson lived on his family's farm south of Glenwood, he had seldom missed the harvest or the lakeside celebration. As the longtime chairman of the county DFL, it always had been his job to ran the hotdog booth.

But today he was in a hospital bed in downtown Minneapolis. The blinds of the orange-walled room were drawn against the rising sun. He had suffered a seizure the morning before. Doctors said it probably left him unaware of his surroundings, beyond pain and — finally — beyond struggling.

Yet those closest to him swore he could hear them, and knew what was happening, and knew it was time.

"Three times during the course of the night he brought his hands together and his lips would move, and you knew he was praying. I can't help I but think he was shutting himself down," said Roy Schmidt, a Minnesota AIDS Project official and longtime friend who stayed with

Hanson that last night.

Hanson died holding the hands of the two people most dear to him — his sister, Mary Hanson-Jenniges, and his partner of five years, .. Bert Henningson.

"Amazing Grace" was playing softly on a tape machine in the corner of the room. It was Hanson's favorite hymn, the one he had sung over his mother's grave barely a year ago.

This is the final chapter of Hanson's story. After having lived a year longer than he was expected to, he grew weary of fighting for his life and was willing — if not eager — for it to end.

After his death, he was cremated. Mourners came to his childhood church for a memorial service that was vintage Hanson — traditionally religious but politically radical and, inevitably, controversial.

Henningson is left behind on the farm with a legacy of love — and death. For now he, too, is sick, suffering early symptoms of acquired immune deficiency syndrome. No sooner will he finish grieving for Hanson than he must begin grieving for himself.

■ ■ ■

Dick Hanson spent the last weekend of his life at the farm where he grew up. It is there he began his goodbyes.

Grant Hanson came to the farmhouse for the first time in months. Of Hanson's four brothers, he was closest to Dick in age, temperament, and affection.

Grant was alone. His wife never had gotten over her overwhelming fear of AIDS and had forbidden Grant any close contact with Dick, worried he would carry the virus home to their five children.

"I think Grant wanted very much to touch me and hug me," Hanson said. "But he said he couldn't lie about it to Joyce and she'd just be so upset if she thought he got too close. So he just sat across the room from me.

"But we had a very deep talk. He said if there was any of the four brothers he could have farmed with, it was me. I guess I've always known that, but it was nice to hear him say that. And it was just something special that he came out and came into the house for the first time."

Allen Hanson made two visits to the farm that weekend to see his son. They never spoke directly of death.

"Dad has been coming out every Friday night on his own and has sat for a long time and has not wanted to leave," Hanson said. "But this last time seemed like a special time for him. He doesn't want to talk about me dying. I guess I haven't found the right words to talk to him about the situation. I was just hoping somehow he could see I was at peace.

"My sister Mary came out with him on Sunday. It was hard for her to see me use the cane and have

trouble walking. I guess I stumbled a few times, and when I went outside Bert had to hold my hand. She just had to leave the room and go outside and cry. It was just too hard for her. Bert talked to her and said he has watched me every day, and he said I'm the same person. The inner person of me is still there, and the outer body is something you just have to see past. It's like people growing old together, you just have to accept it.

"So Bert stayed outside with Dad for a while and Mary came back in and sat on the couch and we just had a real deep conversation. I just said, 'Do you know that I'm at peace? I could go the next hour or the next day and be ready.' I think by the time she left she really believed me.

"I just felt like I was saying my good byes to each and every one of them. So even though I may never make it back, I felt I had a chance to be with them in a very special way."

Hanson was alienated from his three other brothers in early spring, when an Alexandria television station did a series of stories about him. The brothers were angered and embarrassed by Hanson's decision to tell his story publicly, and accused him of bringing shame on the family.

But Leland Hanson, a conservative Christian who is younger than Hanson by a year, telephoned after hearing his brother had been, admitted to the hospital. Hanson's oldest brother, John, had stopped at the farm a few weeks earlier for a short visit. Hanson never heard from Tom, his youngest brother and longtime fishing companion.

■ ■ ■

Hanson entered the hospital two days later after a vicious bout of vomiting. He predicted it was his last hospitalization, and he seemed almost anxious to die. His characteristic cheerfulness was gone. He still talked occasionally of gaining weight and living several more months, but now the phrases of hope rang hollow, as if they were expected but not meant.

"The time is close," he said to friend Roy Schmidt, who pretended not to hear.

"He's pretty much given up," said his physician, Dr. Margaret Simpson. "Dick has always been an eternal optimist, and somehow he always bounced back before. But in the last two months, there's been a major turnaround. ... Most people just get tired of feeling this bad. They say, 'I don't want to die, but I don't want to live like this.'"

Yet a core of spunk remained. The sugar-water dripping into his veins perked him up, "giving me the opportunity to just gab away a few more days," he said.

A stream of visitors crowded to his bedside. He had to strain to see them through his blurred vision, or depend on his partner, Bert Henningson, to identify

them. He comforted them as they cried, clutching their hands and reminding them each of some special moment or gesture that had enriched his life.

He insisted on sitting up as often as he could during the day, and tried to shake himself out of his morphine doze whenever he had visitors. Henningson teased that Hanson was just testing people "to see how interesting a conversationalist they are."

Hanson brightened most at the talk of politics. He scowled at the news that conservative Cardinal John O'Connor of New York was named to the president's AIDS task force. He smiled in satisfaction when a political crony from Glenwood reported she had been granted a long-sought audience with a state legislator after dropping Hanson's name.

A sympathy call from Gov. Rudy Perpich was cause for quiet pride — and prompt action.

"He praised me for being willing to be public, and for challenging people to be responsive in a public way to what we've done," Hanson said. "And he asked if there was anything he could do to help."

The next day, with Henningson's help, Hanson fired off a two-page letter to Perpich suggesting changes in state law to force nursing homes to accept terminal AIDS patients.

Hanson also remained a keen critic of the news media, constantly analyzing whether they were doing an adequate job to increase the public understanding of AIDS. He pumped Henningson for information about federal funding for AIDS research, laws guaranteeing compassionate treatment of patients or medical advances that might help the next generation of sufferers.

And he kept a healthy hold on his ego. He was fascinated to see himself in a follow-up story on the Alexandria television station, to witness the shocking change in his looks over the last two years.

He died just before *People* magazine ran a cover story about AIDS in America, and before *Newsweek* ran its dramatic photo package called "The Face of AIDS," a haunting panoply of 302 men, women and children who have died of AIDS in the past year.

Hanson would have been pleased to know his picture was included.

■ ■ ■

In the end, Hanson starved to death.

Since he became ill in late 1985, the AIDS virus had waged an insidious attack throughout his body. His skin broke out in herpes rashes. A related virus ate at his optical nerves, methodically destroying his eyesight. He frequently ran fevers as high as 104 degrees, and more frequently lay huddled under heavy blankets as icy rivulets of sweat soaked through to the mattress. Sometimes he had diarrhea, while other times he would

go two or three weeks between bowel movements. His weight plummeted from 160 to 112.

He fought back with blood transfusions, eye injections, inhalation therapy, toxic drugs and home-brewed organic compounds, but his greatest medicines seemed to be faith and a stubborn will to survive. He defied the odds last August, and again in December, when he was expected to die from pneumocystis pneumonia, the most common killer of AIDS patients.

While he regained some of his lost weight and strength from the experimental drug AZT, he also was boosted by the fresh bounty of his garden and by home-baked treats from his country neighbors.

He used the time he had left to crusade, traveling the state, preaching a gospel of hope and acceptance for AIDS sufferers. For several months, he felt so good he vowed to be the first to survive the fatal virus. After a life of championing underdog causes, it would be his greatest triumph.

Then the nausea returned two months ago, leaving him unable to digest solid foods and launching a precipitous weight loss. As his 5 foot-10 frame shrunk and shriveled, his feet and hands and head seemed to grow enormous.

He walked with a cane, when he walked at all, shuffling to negotiate through doorways and around furniture. He fell once when he was alone, landing on his back on the bedboard, and was unable to move for almost an hour.

He had grown suddenly old. He trembled with the sheer effort of sitting up and with a constant chill that was impervious to the muggy summer heat. His face at times looked ancient, the forehead protruding atop the fleshless skull, the eyes bulging over pronounced cheekbones.

Yet the same face could look disarmingly young. The worry lines that once creased his forehead were gone and the soft laugh lines were pulled smooth as his skin stretched tautly over his skull.

The heavy gold-framed glasses no longer fit his face, edging each day nearer the tip of his nose, constantly threatening to slip off. His brown eyes were often cloudy and distant, like a child's lost in a world of fantasy.

The uncontrolled vomiting started a week before he died. He had nibbled on a neighbor's moist zucchini bread, declaring it so tasty he abandoned his precautionary avoidance of solid foods. When the retching began that night, nothing would stay down, not even medicine.

Three days later, he was rushed to the hospital, dangerously dehydrated. He weighed 107 pounds, his skin as dry as parchment and cold to the touch.

He refused a feeding tube and requested a Do Not

Resuscitate order. He tried to decline all medicines, even painkillers, so death would come more quickly. Simpson insisted only on keeping him comfortable, sympathizing with his desire to die.

"She felt it was a terrific period of time I'd had, and that I had done a lot since December," Hanson said two days before he died. "She said I shouldn't feel guilty about not wanting to do every little thing possible to extend my life."

He lived on crushed ice those last four days. His sister, Mary Hanson-Jenniges, or Henningson stayed with him round-the-clock to spoonfeed him, wash his beard and change his soiled hospital gowns.

As he neared the end, he struggled against an increasingly dense fog brought on by the morphine he was given every eight hours.

"It's about all we can give him," Simpson said.

■ ■ ■

Hanson suffered a seizure on his third day in the hospital, while Henningson was giving him his morning shower.

It was part of the hospital ritual — a shower and a shampoo every other day if Hanson was up to it, a bed bath if he was not. It was the only physical intimacy the two men had left.

In the shower, Henningson chattered at Hanson about mundane things. He said he had stayed up late the night before, after leaving the hospital, to watch the magnificent thunderstorms that brought 100-year-rains to the city, thunderstorms that Hanson missed because he was fuzzy with morphine and because hospital policy required that the shades be drawn in case of shattering glass.

And Henningson updated Hanson about the latest political news — another ritual. As Hanson's eyesight failed and his headaches worsened, he relied on Henningson for his daily fix of news from Washington, D.C., or St. Paul or the Metrodome.

Henningson was telling him about the Iran-contra hearings, about Secretary of State. George Shultz's startling testimony, when the seizure began.

"I was just saying, 'I'll tell you all about it when we get you back in bed,'" Henningson said later that morning. «And suddenly he started pushing out at me, very rigid and quite strong. I had to get a nurse to help me.

"And now there's no more recognition or response. He may be able to hear us, but there's no way to know. But if he is beyond hearing us, he's in effect been released. Now it's just a matter of the body going along. There will be no more pain, no suffering. Oh, I hope so."

■ ■ ■

The doctor said Hanson's organs were still strong, his farmer's heart and lungs pumping in defiance of the

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coma-like trance. He could live as long as two weeks like that, his eyes open but unblinking, his knees drawn up, legs twitching and arms tugging toward his chest, trying to curl up like a baby, his head cocked oddly to one side.

But others sensed it wasn't so.

Henningson ushered out the last of the day's many visitors, and drove to his South Minneapolis apartment for much-needed sleep. He awoke about 3 a.m. and cried and prayed and waited.

Hanson-Jenniges refused to return home to Glenwood that day and didn't bother with sleep that night. She sat at her brother's bedside, wearing the same clothes she had been in for three days, and watched his sunken chest move shallowly up and down. She prayed through the night for his death.

Alice Tripp, Hanson's old friend and political compatriot from Sedan, had driven to Minneapolis with Hanson-Jenniges. Tripp was asleep in the guest room of her daughter's house in suburban Minneapolis when something woke her about 4 a.m. She lay awake until daylight, thinking of the young man who had stood with her on countless picket lines and motivated her to run for governor in 1978, quietly convincing her and dozens of other women in rural Minnesota they could make a difference.

Jane Ireland, a chaplain from Hennepin County Medical Center, also awoke at 4 a.m. She was going to telephone Hanson's hospital room but, for some reason, didn't. Her concentration on him was so intense that later, when the phone did ring, she didn't hear it.

And back in Glenwood, Pearl Brosvick had trouble sleeping. She spent a restless night alone in the large farmhouse, where she had nursed her invalid husband for more than 20 years before he died, and where her godson, Dick Hanson, had whiled away rainy afternoons playing with other farm youngsters — the only children Brosvick ever had.

Sometime during the darkest hours of the morning, Hanson's breathing grew labored. His sister asked the nurse to give him a slow measure of oxygen through the mask — enough to smooth his breathing but not enough to keep him alive. She put some soothing music in the tape machine, just in case Hanson could hear, and called Henningson.

Henningson took his time returning to the hospital. He showered and finished his prayers and savored the quiet time, sensing it was about to end.

He reached Hanson's bedside at 5:20 a.m. Ten minutes later, Hanson died.

"I think he waited for me," Henningson said.

■ ■ ■

Henningson's voice echoed in the vast basement vault of the Minnesota Cremation Society in South

Minneapolis. He sat alone with Hanson's shrouded body, waiting for the cremation to begin.

Hanson always had been the stronger singer, his clear voice and natural pitch carrying the melody of folk songs while Henningson followed with a self-conscious harmony.

But this morning there was no one to hear Henningson as he sang Hanson's favorite hymns, "Amazing Grace" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." And "Joe Hill," the ballad of the martyred union organizer.

"I've been singing him 'Joe Hill' for the last several weeks because in the song it says, 'I never died, said he,'" Henningson later told the six people — brought together only by a common friendship with Hanson — who waited for him in the hushed, formal parlor upstairs.

Henningson had been uneasy about the cremation. He faced criticism from some of Hanson's relatives who preferred a traditional burial. Others had wanted the body embalmed for a viewing.

But Henningson was determined to honor Hanson's wishes to be autopsied for study by AIDS researchers and then to be cremated.

"The ancient Greeks and the Indians, they all have the tradition of the funeral pyre where residual spirits are released," Henningson said.

"We had a philosophical difficulty with burial, doing that to the earth, and Dick was an environmentalist who cared for the earth. ... And I didn't want to put Dick in the earth with the AIDS virus in him. They can drain the blood in embalming, but the virus is still in the tissues. Burning is a purifying thing and it kills the virus."

Henningson had not known what to expect at the cremation. After months of being a no-nonsense caretaker for Hanson, Henningson suddenly felt shaken and unsure. The despair that gripped him in the wake of Hanson's death took him by surprise. His hands were icy when he entered the vault, and he said his voice trembled as he began to sing.

"Then I felt calmer and I put my head down," he said. "Then my head was pulled up, and I felt my mouth fall open and I felt warmer than I had been in days. And I knew the spirit had come into me and he was free and he was with me."

"They say the spirit stays around awhile so we can learn not to be apart. But I thought, 'I'm going to have to share you.' Then I just laughed out loud, because that's the way it always was, I always had to share my time with Dick. And there are lots of people now who will want part of his spirit."

■ ■ ■

It was already dark when Henningson arrived at

the farm the next evening. He was tired and still had much to do. He had to prepare for Saturday's memorial service—last-minute visits with the minister and the florist, and a thorough cleaning to rid the house of countless medicine bottles, stained sheets, sweat-soaked bed cushions and other vestiges of terminal illness.

But those things would have to wait. Henningson went straight upstairs to the screened porch that overlooks the marshes in front of the farmhouse. He found the old pink candle, set it on the small table by the middle window and lit it, placing Hanson's Bible and the urn of ashes next to it. Henningson lay on one of the metal-frame cots, watched the candle's flame and remembered.

"We rehabbed the porch in the summer of '84 so we could use it," he said later. "The screens had been torn out by kids or whatever, so we screened it up and Dick's mother went to her auctions and got cots and a table for 50 cents or something ridiculous.

"It was dry that summer, not humid. The strawberries were especially good and I found a recipe for an old-fashioned, biscuit-type of shortcake. We would use the porch in the evenings. We'd spend all day with the hogs, then go up there and have our biscuits and strawberries and cream. There were good memories up there.

"That was an election year, and Dick was running for Congress. And often what I'd do, when Dick was out on the campaign trail, I'd light the pink candle and wait for him to come home. It was a nice signal for him to see as he drove in."

On this night, Henningson again lit the candle. But his sentimental vigil was brief, cut short by practicality. He fought sleep a while longer, but felt himself sinking into the thin mattress.

The last few months of caring for Hanson had extracted an ironic price. Stress had activated the AIDS virus, which had lain dormant in Henningson's body for so long but now was attacking his strength with a vengeful speed.

He blew out the candle, took two sleeping pills to ward off anxiety and set his alarm for 3 a.m., when he was scheduled to take his next dose of life-prolonging AZT.

■ ■ ■

The mourners came a week after the death, driving down the dusty prairie road to tiny Barsness Lutheran Church. As they entered the stuffy lobby of the white-washed sanctuary, they passed a table loaded with the treasures of Hanson's life — a "great bazaar," as Henningson called it.

They saw his degree from the University of Minnesota-Morris. Photos of his biggest fish and proudest garden and of his family at his only sister's

wedding. His formal campaign portrait from his run for Congress in 1984. His fishing license and the black rod and reel he used to take hundred of walleyes out of Lake Minnewaska.

His well-thumbed Bible was there, next to a rusty planting trowel and a jar of decorative corn from one of his harvests. His grubby powerline protest T-shirt was neatly folded and covered with shards of green glass and metal — the broken transformers and sawed — off bolts from the transmission towers downed during those protests.

There were a few buttons from his various political alliances, although Hanson had donated most of the collection to a DFL fundraiser. Add a tattered red bandana he wore around his arm during farm foreclosure demonstrations — a symbol of his willingness to be arrested.

The display was crowned by a splendid bouquet of gladiolas — flowers that Hanson had grown in the garden next to the farmhouse.

Friends fingered the trinkets and remembered, their laughter torn with tears.

"We have lost a rare friend, a man of courage and vision who raised so many of our hopes," said Anne Kanten, assistant commissioner of the Minnesota Agriculture Department, who gave the eulogy at Hanson's request. "His tenacity frustrated us, and his courage absolutely scared us to death. The greatest tribute we can pay him is to continue the struggle. We have to march and lead and change the systems that need changing. That is the legacy Dick Hanson left us."

But Hanson's legacy, like his life, was burdened by disapproval and controversy. Some relatives and neighbors bristled at his public homosexuality and were disturbed to find reminders of it at the memorial service.

In the middle of the table in the church lobby lay a yellowed copy of *Equal Times*, a Minneapolis-based gay newspaper that carried a front page story about Hanson's fight with AIDS. Pinned to the paper was a small button, black with a pink triangle—the sign used to identify homosexuals in Nazi Germany and now a universal symbol of pride for gays and lesbians.

Conservative church members took exception to those items, not wanting it to look as if they condoned homosexuality. Others resented the presence of outsiders — a reporter and photographer who were chronicling Hanson's death, and a caravan of mourners from the Minneapolis gay community. And some still feared contact with the AIDS virus.

"People at the church said there was too much gay stuff involved in the service," Henningson said. "But that was a very significant part of Dick's life, that and his struggle in the last year. How can we deny that?"

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The greatest resistance came from within the Hanson family, a large family — five siblings, three spouses and numerous nieces and nephews — that shrunk when asked to stand together at his death. A shaky and confused Allen Hanson greeted the mourners at the service, flanked only by his daughter, Mary, and son, Grant. Two of the three pews reserved for the Hanson family remained largely empty.

Leland Hanson came to the church with his wife and teenage daughter, but left abruptly before the service began. He declined to comment, but family members said he was angered at the presence of a photographer.

Tom Hanson waited until all the mourners were seated, then entered the church through a side door. He sat alone in the choir loft, telling one of his brothers he would not sit in a church filled with homosexuals. He left before the service ended, refusing to greet mourners or to join the modest luncheon afterwards in the church basement.

John Hanson quietly sat in the front of the church with his two grown daughters. But his wife, Kathy, and their teenage sons did not attend. Kathy Hanson has said she wanted nothing to do with Dick Hanson, and the boys — who have been teased at school — have been advised to deny they were related to him.

Grant Hanson's wife, Joyce, stayed home with her five young children. She called Henningson with condolences before the service but said she couldn't overcome her fear of AIDS.

"I really cared for Dickie," she said. "Maybe I should have gone. Maybe it would be different if it was just me, but I have to think about the kids."

In contrast, Henningson was surrounded by family members. His parents drove over from Ortonville, in neighboring Big Stone County. A few of his uncles were there, and his two brothers and their families. His sister called from Portland, Ore., to say she would be praying for him during the service.

"This is not a family that will abandon him," Ailys Henningson said of her son.

Behind the two families, the pews of the simple church were packed with about 150 mourners — public officials, anti-establishment radicals, farmers and homosexuals sitting shoulder-to-shoulder in their Sunday best.

"There's one thing we all have in common," said the Rev. Earl Hauge, a farmer and former state legislator, who presided over the service in the absence of Barsness Pastor Carl Listug, who was on vacation. "We have all been irritated by Dick at one time or another.

"There are times when we wanted to be left alone and left in peace, but he was always pushing us to carry on the cause. And he was an irritant to himself. If you

had trouble accepting him, remember it took almost 10 years for him to accept himself that he was different, perhaps gay."

State Rep. Glen Anderson, DFL-Bellingham, and state Sen. Gary DeCramer, DFL-Ghent, were there. Gov. Rudy Perpich and his wife, Lola, sent a lush bouquet of pink and white roses for the altar. Other DFL leaders sent condolences from the party's central committee meeting in Grand Rapids. There were representatives from the Minnesota AIDS Project and the Minnesota Health Department.

But the majority of mourners were women, many of them well into the second half of their lives, the same women whom Hanson had found most responsive to his political radicalism and most accepting of his personal lifestyle.

Ten were selected by Hanson before his death to serve as honorary pallbearers. They were his political proteges: Alice Tripp, a sturdy second mother who stood with him to block construction of the United Power Association high-voltage transmission line; elegant Mary Stackpool of Glenwood, who made a bid for the state Senate last year under Hanson's tutelage; Lou Anne Kling, a former DFL county chairwoman from southwestern Minnesota who was involved in the Groundswell farm movement; and lively Nancy Barsness, who, with Hanson's backing, returned to college after her children were grown, graduating with straight As.

"Dick was well aware of the negative social pressures that discouraged women from seeking active public roles," Henningson said in a formal thank-you speech to the congregation. "He helped escort them along the way before he died, and he asked that these women be his escorts now as he begins his journey to a long and boundless life."

The other women were even older and less well known, but no less precious to Hanson. They were members of the Martha Circle of the Barsness Ladies Aid, a group Hanson's mother belonged to, and a group that, to him, represented respectability and acceptance.

While some paid their respects at the service, others worked downstairs in the church kitchen, preparing a meal of sandwiches and cakes. The get-well card Hanson received from the Martha Circle when he first was diagnosed with AIDS had remained one of his most cherished possessions.

"That card was the first indication that people here would not abandon him, but would show him true Christian love," Henningson said in his speech. "Dick was a strong and courageous man, willing to challenge authority and fight for justice. But he also was a sensitive soul who did not want to lose his friends here. I believe the welcome you extended gave him a great

deal of his strength and peace in his fight with AIDS.”

■ ■ ■

The ugly gossip found its way back to Henningson. A fisherman had been overheard at a local coffee shop, complaining that Lake Minnewaska would be contaminated with AIDS if Hanson's ashes, were placed there.

For Henningson, it was just the piece of dark news he needed to trigger his anger and pull him out of a growing despondency. He had spent the previous week fighting for his right, as Hanson's partner and legal executor, to handle Hanson's death. Officials questioned his authority to make decisions about treatment, cremation and the disposal of the ashes, insisting on corroboration from a blood relative.

“There seemed to be great poles emerging at the time of his death, denying our relationship together and trying to shove Dick back in the closet again,” Henningson said.

The two men met at a political convention in 1982. Hanson probably already was infected with the AIDS virus, although there was no way to know for sure — a test for the virus had not been developed. Hanson had spent the previous three years exploring his homosexuality, “coming out and crashing out,” as he called it, making up for 15 years of self-denial. He worked alone on the farm for weeks at a time, then traveled to Minneapolis or San Francisco or New York on political and sexual junkets.

“I can point to an awful lot of anonymous, unsafe sex,” Hanson said a few months before his death. “The likelihood is I got AIDS because of being much more sexually active. But I don't know that it gains anything to know.

“I have given it a lot of thought. You try to go back and remember why you did something or not. There were social factors. It was just easier to have sex when I went to the Cities for the weekend. Being on the farm was not good for developing long-term relationships. And what would my family think if I brought home someone important to me? So I put a big blame, if there is any, on society's pressure that we had to be anonymous and closeted.

“There were a lot of people from Wisconsin, Iowa, the Dakotas doing the same thing. They were farmers, businessmen, teachers, priests. We just had an awful lot in common, living in an environment that wasn't acceptable to us being ourselves. So there was a lot more going on besides sex. Each time I went in it'd be like a therapy session. I saw each individual as someone who was special and I wanted to get to know a little bit. And there were a pretty good number of people I just visited with and got to know and never had sex with.

“I think of all those people. They had all those

same emotions, the same need for some warm, loving embracing and healthy contact. It was good for me to discover that I could give something I didn't think was possible, that I wasn't just some freak not attracted by the opposite sex.”

Henningson's sexual history was different. His marriage to a childhood friend had failed, and he had come to terms with his homosexuality through the Program in Human Sexuality at the University of Minnesota.

But gay liaisons had seldom worked for him. He had no tolerance for the fast-lane scene in the bars and bathhouses. After three unsuccessful involvements, he retreated into school, work and political activism—a route that led him to Hanson, whom he read about in a biography of power line protesters.

The men shared an uncannily similar background. Both were farm boys who never quite felt they belonged, who knew they were different before they even had a word for their homosexuality. Both became politically involved with the radical National Farmers Organization while still in grade school. Both were Vietnam War protesters, liberal Democrats and farm activists. Both felt rooted to life on the farm.

But they were temperamental opposites. Henningson's biting wit and quick temper was a balance to Hanson's sugary sincerity. Hanson's yen for the public limelight allowed Henningson to work in the background, where he was most comfortable. When Hanson was overcome with insecurity and self-doubt, he looked to Henningson for a gentle nudge of confidence. Hanson was the talker, Henningson the reader and writer.

Henningson was attracted to Hanson's vulnerability, a personal passivity with family and friends that contradicted his public image as a rabble-rouser.

Throughout his life, Henningson had been a caretaker — lending his car to friends against his father's advice, opening a counseling service for Vietnam veterans, working as an orderly in a Twin Cities nursing home.

Later, when Hanson became ill, it was natural for Henningson to assume the role of provider — earning the money that bought the groceries, laundering the soiled clothes and bedsheets, keeping a matter-of-fact attitude in the face of certain death, refusing to let Hanson wallow in depression or self-pity.

He was the one who said no when Hanson wouldn't, who reminded Hanson when to take a nap or wear a jacket. Once, when Hanson was patiently explaining his AIDS crusade to an abusive caller, Henningson simply unplugged the phone.

“I've always thought our relationship was

preordained,” Henningson said. “Dick probably got the virus in 1980, before we met. If he had to go through this AIDS bout the last year alone, he wouldn’t have made it. So I think it was preordained. I would meet him and be there to take care of him.

“But I would lose my life, too, in the process. ... Giving up one’s own life to allow another to die with dignity ..., that’s the purpose for my life.”

Henningson said it’s “likely” he caught the AIDS virus from Hanson. Though the two exchanged private vows of commitment five years ago, they agreed they could have outside affairs, a not uncommon arrangement among gay couples.

“If it felt right, we have had light safe sex with others,” Hanson said. “I encouraged that as part of a trusting relationship. I feel even post-AIDS there are people who need to not be rejected sexually.”

Henningson agreed, knowing they had “reserved a part of our lives that wasn’t going to be shared by others.” He and Hanson discussed the risk of AIDS when they met, but decided their relationship was worth it.

“I’m half-Danish and, like the Scandinavians, there’s a fatalism there,” Henningson said. “If life dishes you out a lot of bad things, you roll with it because that’s the way life is and there’s not much you can do about it. Life’s too short to lay guilt and all the rest of that. Nobody goes out and asks for AIDS. Nobody would want something “like this. It’s just something that happens and you have to deal with it.”

■ ■ ■

The diarrhea struck Henningson in early spring. He paid it little mind at first, thinking he had caught a flu bug from Hanson’s young niece. He had tested positive for the AIDS virus a year earlier, just after Hanson first fell ill. But with his background of limited sexual encounters, Henningson felt he was at minimal risk.

“My medical history didn’t fit the profile and there was no reason to believe I’d go on to develop symptoms,” he said. “So emotionally I was buffered.”

But as the year wore on, and the strain of caring for Hanson became greater, Henningson couldn’t shake the sickness. He had all the telltale signs: diarrhea, night sweats, alternating chills and fever. His weight began a steady drop, just as Hanson’s had a year earlier.

Henningson is a small man who consciously kept his weight just below 130 pounds, fearing middle-age spread. By late spring, he was down to 120 and was sewing tucks in the waistlines of his pants. By early summer, he had lost 5 more pounds and was buying pants in smaller sizes. By midsummer, he weighed less than 110 and was wearing suspenders.

He was diagnosed as having ARC — AIDS-related complex — several months ago, but initially

declined to discuss his condition publicly. At the time, he was applying for various loans to try to save the farm from foreclosure and, as he said, “They won’t lend money to a dying man.”

The farmhouse and surrounding 40-acre wetlands belong to Henningson now, signed over to him by Hanson a year ago and purchased for \$8,000 under an agreement with the Federal Land Bank. With Hanson’s impending death and his own deteriorating health, he realized it was futile to try to keep the cropland.

Instead, he decided to devote his dwindling energy to caring for Hanson, and to joining Hanson’s crusade to educate others about AIDS.

“I realized how important it was in the face of this epidemic to get more public understanding about what has to be done,” Henningson said. “Maybe not for me, but for the next generation of AIDS patients who will be getting sick in a year or so. It’s a social obligation to them.”

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Henningson’s regrets are few. He had no lofty career ambitions, content instead to study history and to write philosophy on his home computer. He never questioned his commitment to Hanson, despite its price. From the day they met, Henningson knew he wanted to spend the rest of his life with Hanson.

Now he wants to spend what is left reflecting on what their time together meant.

“It was like growing old together,” he said. “The whole process was just speeded up for us. A couple usually has a lifetime to grow old together. We didn’t have that time. We had to compensate for things we couldn’t do anymore.

“There was no sex the last month. But that’s like growing old, too. My parents have a plaque in their kitchen: “Lovin’ don’t last, but good cookin’ do.’ Relationships change. You move past the passion of the first year and mellow out. You have to or you’ll bum yourself out.

“We had stopped kissing on the lips. I didn’t want to pass anything on to him. But that Tuesday in the hospital, when it looked like it would be terminal and it would go real fast, we just reached for each other. So then every time I’d be gone and come back into the room, I would kiss him.

“I realized what I missed was that close physical sharing we had. I guess I became more of a mother-comforter. I was so busy. I hadn’t realized I missed it. So if there’s any mourning I do — although I feel his spirit with me — it’s a deferred realization of what we had been missing the last few months. As much as the homophobes try, they can’t deny what we have hi also a physical relationship.”

Henningson has been left pale and tired by the last

year. A disturbing rash marred his cheek — acne from the stress or, possibly, something more ominous, herpes or Kaposi's sarcoma, a cancer that attacks 40 percent of AIDS patients.

Yet a heaviness has lifted, leaving him with a sense of relief.

"I've seen spouses after a death, and they have a serenity about them," he said. "It's like they've accepted the death and still feel close to the spouse. They feel no compulsion to find anyone else. They still have a complete life in terms of feeling comforted by the closeness of the spirit.

"I've been a hermit all my life. Even as a child I was reclusive. The calling I had to live with Dick has been good. But if I now go back to being alone, it's not foreign to me. I spent most of my life that way." He has pulled out his favorite books — acid essays by H.L. Mencken and "Mountain Dialogues" by Frank Waters — and has lined up agriculture research projects that will allow him to work at home. He was accepted into an experimental AZT project at the University of Minnesota Hospital and Clinic and will continue to seek treatment in Minneapolis, where an acquaintance is letting him live rent-free.

He will spend as much time as possible at the farm. Hanson's friends have become his, and can be counted on for companionship. Hanson's brother-in-law, Doug Jenniges, has offered to do the heavy labor, mowing the lawn through fall and plowing the driveway if Henningson tries to keep the farmhouse open through the winter.

Thoughts of his own illness, of Hanson's history repeating itself through him, don't greatly trouble him now. He might have a few years, he said. Or he might have a few months.

"I cry almost every day for might-have-beens," he said. "But it's just a momentary passing tear at something that's especially poignant. It's just a passing emotion, but it becomes part of your psyche in preparing for the future, and then it's not as terrifying.

"Oh, it'd be nice to think about living a lot longer and having all the time. But there's an attraction to going, too. We hear things about what's waiting for us and we have notions about it, and I'm curious to find out what it is. And if that happens sooner rather than later, that's fine.

"Meanwhile, Dick is there for me, not just on the other side, but here, now. That's something I find very comforting. And I know if I end up feeling more and more ill, there'll be someone out there waiting with an outstretched hand. And I have a very good idea who that'll be. So I won't be alone. "

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Henningson felt oddly light-hearted as he scattered

Hanson's ashes into the stony creek. His bleached blue jeans were held up by suspenders, and a straw Panama hat kept the sun out of his eyes as he walked out to the creek where Hanson had played as a child. The waters there tumble rapidly during spring runoff, eventually spilling into the Minnesota River and along to the Mississippi.

"Dick got a lot of fish out of there and ate them, so throwing his ashes back there as fish food is just returning the favor," he said. "It's part of the natural cycle of the earth, ashes to ashes.

"That may sound a bit too flip, but that's how I felt."

That afternoon, he and Mary Hanson-Jenniges planted a memorial petunia next to the geraniums on Hanson's mother's grave. A few days later, a church member was mowing the cemetery lawn and cut too close around the tombstone. The petunia was mowed down.

Henningson was unperturbed. "The roots are strong. It'll grow back. "

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(An epilog chronicling Bert Henningson's battle with AIDS was published in April 1988, three days after the Pulitzer Prizes were announced. Bert Henningson died six weeks later, in late May 1988.)

Jacqui Banaszynski is now a Knight Chair Professor at the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri, and an Editing Fellow at The Poynter Institute for Media Studies. She worked as a projects editor at the St. Paul Pioneer Press, The Oregonian in Portland, Ore., and The Seattle Times.