

20

LIFELONG COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER
“STUPID AWARDS”
THE LAST SUPPER OF THE
LEATHER PATRIARCH

For almost forty years, whenever a women’s or men’s leather organization or community fund-raiser invited him to speak on a panel or to read from his work or to judge a leather beauty contest, Larry made it a genuine point of honor to show up to help his hosts succeed. His aura drew fans who genuinely loved him. Larry knew people never forget how you make them feel.

He was honored with several awards from the leather community. In 1995, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from LeatherFest Los Angeles. That same year he was doubly dignified by the National Leather Association with both its Steve Maidhof Award for literary activism and its Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2000, he welcomed the Special Community Award from Christopher Street West. In 2002 he was iconized with a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Erotic Authors Association, and with a Pantheon of Leather Forebear Award from Dave Rhodes’ *Leather Journal*. In 2016, CLAW, the Cleveland Leather Annual Weekend organization, inducted him posthumously into its Leather Hall of Fame. On December 21, 1997, when we were faxing each other weekly, he surprised me when he wrote, somewhat facetiously, complaining about “crap” he had to take from “assholes” for “stupid awards” he “didn’t want anyway.” He was not ungrateful for his awards and he didn’t mean any award in particular when he joked:

Why the fuck doesn't someone give me an award that has a nice substantial check attached to it. How much do you get for a Pulitzer?

Readers appreciated that his *Handbook* was authentically “descriptive” of emerging leather behavior, and not a nasty “prescriptive” book of old-guard “Thou Shalt Not” rules. Matt Johnson, born six years after *The Leatherman's Handbook* was published, acknowledged Larry's permissive latitude in the Leather Archives & Museum magazine, *The Leather Times*, issue 1, 2009:

Townsend, a prolific writer and shrewd businessman, was able [because he ran his own press, and recycled his titles with other publishers]...to keep much of his work in circulation during his lifetime....three decades in print is an impressive tenure for any book, let alone a non-fiction pulp paperback about a fairly arcane mode of gay sex.... When I first read his *Handbook* [in 1998], I wanted so badly to be told what to do that I completely missed what Townsend was up to: telling us [not what to do so much as telling us] who we are.

Larry's last public appearance and speech was in March 2008 at the Mr. San Diego Leather Appreciation Supper for thirty people hosted by Graylin Thornton, the African-American Mr. Drummer 1993, among whose goals was to make leather more racially inclusive. Larry, Graylin recalled, became “irritated” that evening with a well-meaning guest speaker who, taking the microphone for ten minutes to introduce the Legend, stole his thunder leaving Larry little to add about his life and career. In his address, the author, who would die in four months, expressed his lifelong concern about his wits:

I'm afraid of losing control. I don't use drugs and I don't drink more than two drinks a night.

In June, just weeks before he died, I published his last piece of writing in *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer* in which he

documented his personal version of the constant battles fought by the besieged leather community against the LAPD.

He was as much a media celebrity in London and Berlin and Chicago as he was in Los Angeles. In New York at the Mineshaft on February 28, 1982, manager Wally Wallace—whom Larry squired around bars on his visits to LA—feted him like a leather god with a party invitation drawn by Rex who threw down a gauntlet to the guests with a message advising: “The very best way to tell our guest Larry Townsend...that New York knows what he wrote about is to just get down and do it!”

That challenge to action was unintentionally ironic. Larry was there to sell books. He, who talked and wrote a good game, would never have played at the perversatile Mineshaft because he was not a heavy player and was not into drugs. I doubt he ever had naked sex. I can't image Larry Townsend naked. He knew the private Townsend could never measure up to the public Townsend. He understood the other famous Larry, Laurence Olivier, who is said to have quipped what any man could have said that every athletic champion proves a big disappointment once you pull down his jockstrap.

In San Francisco, late in his life, even after the VCR and the internet began making books an endangered species, he could pack a crowd into bookstores. When he and I read together from our new books in the Outspoken Series at A Different Light Bookstore at 18th and Castro on November 9, 1997, the audience, shown on the videotape Mark Hemry shot, loved seeing their hero make an entrance into that legendary bookstore with his Doberman dog on one leash, and a nearly naked young leather-dog slave on the other. When both dog and slave “sat” at his stern command, he brought down the house with cheers and applause.