

Gerry Crane remembered with love

MICHIGAN NEWS

BY JAN STEVENSON



CARRYING ON
Former Byron Center teacher devotes efforts to music, dignity

by Theresa D. McEllis
The Grand Rapids Press

As Gerry Crane spends his time studying and looking back on his time in a school district that no longer wants him, he wants to stay in teaching. He wants to keep his musical life, is keeping his dignity and "accepting the worth of all who are different from me."

So Crane is working part-time toward his degree in student counseling at Western Michigan University. "With the degree, he could help students deal with anger, frustration and trust, all emotions he has felt during the past year."

He has felt during the past year, all emotions he has felt during the past year. He has felt during the past year, all emotions he has felt during the past year.

called for the resignation of Crane, who is homosexual, as music director after they learned of his commitment ceremony with a male mate.

More than 500 people attended a school board meeting a year ago at which board members issued a five-page statement condemning homosexuality and promising to "investigate and monitor the current circumstances."

Crane, a 10-year teaching veteran who had spent the past three as music director, resigned last July. He left the post in an agreement with the district that would give him a year's salary, health benefits and a letter of reference.

That beyond accepting the agreement, Crane accepted that he would not change the minds of those opposed to a respect-

GRAND RAPIDS - "He died of a broken heart, literally and figuratively," said Rev. William Evertsberg at teacher Gerry Crane's Jan. 8 memorial service at the Westminster Presbyterian Church, Grand Rapids.

Community members where shocked by Crane's sudden death. "I keep thinking I'll wake up and realize this has just been a horrible nightmare," said Mary Banghart, the former president of the Gay and Lesbian Network of Western Michigan in Grand Rapids. "He was a great friend, and I will miss him terribly."

"He was a person who held up under a tremendous amount of scrutiny and attention," said Phil Duran, a Network board member.

"By being honest about himself he lost his job, his career and eventually I think he lost his life," said Tom Kincaid, vice president of Friends North in Traverse City.

Crane's friend Brad Bergman was in the room when the teacher died. In a widely distributed on-line letter, Bergman wrote, "What most impressed me was how Gerry touched the lives of many people.

What a gift he was to us!"

"Despite the prior public controversy, Mr. Crane's dedication to teaching and music was unwavering and unquestioned," the Byron Center Schools said in a press release. "He will be missed by the many friends he made while working in the district."

Crane's (literally) broken heart was the result of a floppy mitral heart valve, a congenital condition that is usually not fatal. But on Dec. 27, his valve "broke" causing him to drop into a coma from which he never awakened. One week later, after fighting for his life in intensive care, his heart gave out completely. Crane died around 3:30 a.m., Jan. 3. He was 32.

Kent County forensic pathologist Stephen Cohle conducted the autopsy and told the Grand Rapids Press that stress could have contributed to Crane's death. "It may have put him over the edge," Cohle stated.

Figuratively, Gerry Crane's heart was broken by the cruelty of a few loud and vicious critics who wanted him fired from Byron Center High School because he was gay. Upon his resignation he said, "When you live and work in an environment where you are constantly told you aren't acceptable, it's like poison. Just how much can you digest?"

"His supporters were legion, and his detractors few but loud," said Rev. Evertsberg. Evidenced by the 1,000-plus people crowded into the funeral, it was obvious that Crane had touched many lives, a mixture of gay and lesbian people, fellow teachers, and a large group of Crane's former students. Young people burst into

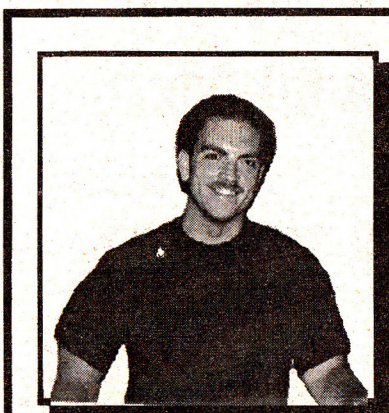
applause, despite the somber tone when Evertsberg proclaimed, "Who needs Mr. Holland when we have Mr. Crane," referring to the fictional character of a beloved high school music teacher in the 1995 movie "Mr. Holland's Opus," starring Richard Dreyfus.

Evertsberg reflected the sadness, the shock and the anger that many people felt at the death of Crane. He honored him as a gifted and generous teacher. He remembered Crane with love and affection for his humor and his ability to care deeply for others.

Evertsberg's tone changed to outrage when he talked about those who condemned Crane for his homosexuality. "He and Randy taught us about love. That you stick with each other even when it's hard. Maybe we'll learn family values from people who aren't supposed to have any."

Evertsberg had performed the commitment ceremony of Crane and Randy Block, his partner of eleven years, so he understood Crane's struggle with his homosexuality. "Gerry was a homosexual Christian, an oxymoron for many people. He felt God was with him every day and concerned Himself with the daily goings on in Gerry's life.

"He even thought he could bargain with God," Evertsberg continued. "At one point he tried to strike a deal that if God would just remove this scourge from his life then he would commit his life to God. That was probably a good part of why he decided early in life to enter the Baptist seminary, where he stayed for about a year. But as he got older, and a bit wiser, he came



GERALD M. CRANE
August 25, 1964
to January 3, 1997

*For the lessons that you taught us,
And the music that you made,
For the gentle love you brought us,
And the heavy price you paid.*

*For integrity and courage —
The examples that you set,
Though you're gone,
we aren't discouraged;
Gerry Crane, we won't forget.*

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THE NETWORK
The Lesbian & Gay Community Network of Western Michigan, Inc.

Contributions can be made to The Gerald M. Crane Memorial Music Scholarship Fund c/o The Grand Rapids Foundation



Randy Block and Gerry Crane share an intimate moment in their home last fall as they were interviewed by Between The Lines for the year in review issue. Block was steadfast in his support of Crane throughout the year and a half that they were exposed to the hatred in Byron Center.

The Network Lesbian and Gay Community Center of Western Michigan, raised over \$3,000 in one weekend to purchase this half page ad in The Grand Rapids Press the day of his memorial service that had over 1000 in attendance.

and anger

to understand that God had made him just the way He wanted him. And once Gerry knew that, he set about being the very best gay man he could."

Controversy over Crane began in the fall of 1995, when some parents learned of Crane and Block's commitment ceremony. That November over 100 people showed up at a school board meeting demanding that Crane be fired or resign because he was homosexual.

A month later, a crowd of over 700 people attended a special school board meeting in the high school gym, where the board decided not to fire Crane for fear of legal repercussions. But the board issued a terse, threatening statement warning Crane that he would be watched closely.

"Individuals who espouse homosexuality do not constitute proper role models for students in this community," Crane and the crowd were told by the board chair.

Crane finished the school year and then resigned in July 1996 with a \$44,000 severance package after pledging not to sue the district. In an article published a month before his death, Crane said the controversy with Byron Center Schools had strengthened his faith.

During the last six months of his life, Crane had begun to rebuild. He had enrolled part-time at Western Michigan University, with plans to pursue a degree in student counseling. He had also worked as choir director for the West Michigan Gay and Lesbian Community Chorus.

"He taught our children to sing," Evertsberg recalled at the memorial service. "In a world where ugliness is gaining on us, can you think of many greater gifts?"

Randy Block, Crane's life partner, has asked that, in lieu of flowers, the family would appreciate gifts to a scholarship fund established in his memory. Gifts may be directed to: **Gerald M. Crane Memorial Music Scholarship Fund, c/o Grand Rapids Foundation, 161 Ottawa Ave., Suite 209-C, Grand Rapids, MI 49503.**

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Rev. William Evertsberg

*speaking at the memorial
service for Gerry Crane*