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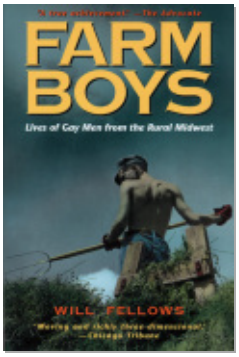
Mark Vanderbeek, Nebraska



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Mark Vanderbeek

Mark was born in 1955 and grew up with two older sisters and a younger brother in southeastern Nebraska, near Adams, in Gage County. The farm was predominantly a grain operation, with some livestock. At the time of our interview, Mark lived in Kansas City, Missouri, and worked for a printing company as an electronic prepress specialist and Macintosh consultant. Mark killed himself in 1994 in the midst of what he described as "an ongoing struggle with clinical, hereditary depression." In this brief narrative, Mark describes how his rural and small-town roots continued to shape his achievement-centered identity.

MY BROTHER DAN is the heir to the throne of the family farm, and he can have it. I have a feeling my parents would have been pretty thrilled if I had wanted to farm, since I'm regarded as more of a perfectionist. According to my dad, when we went out to do fieldwork during planting season, I knew how to prepare the fields just perfectly for him. But Dan is pretty much a perfectionist now, too. Some people might think he fell with his proverbial ass in the butter, but I'm not envious. Dad is supposedly retired, but even in retirement he lives and breathes farming. He goes out to the farm every day, come hell or high water, and kind of manages and manipulates things. Dan has had to learn to finesse that and sometimes has to undo my father's damage.

It was pretty well-known, maybe even from kindergarten, that I was going to be an artist. I just exhibited that talent and it took root. God, the number of times I grumbled about being out on that fucking tractor going back and forth over the fields. And the number of times I grumbled about getting dirty with grain dust. My mom says that's why I didn't become a farmer. I don't like to get dirty. My parents indulged me when I'd put up resistance after three weeks straight of going out to the field. Then it was time for me to do something else for a couple of days. But that doesn't mean when there were emergencies I didn't pitch in. It was a group effort, and I still feel a part of that effort today. My parents haven't the faintest idea what I do in my career, but it's kind of expected that I will keep up with the price of grain, and how much rain they get,

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and I do keep track of that stuff. It's second nature, something you never lose.

Even though I didn't grow up in Adams, I considered myself an Adams person because I went to public schools there, and I had a very strong sense of community—of contributing and sharing. Sports, academics, and everything were very competitive, and when you did something, you did it as much for the glory of Adams as for your own enhancement. In my class, peer pressure and cliques were virtually nil, and the pecking order was minimal. We all tolerated each other's idiosyncracies and respected each other's space. The teachers instilled that in us.

In high school, anyone who had any athletic ability went out for football and basketball, because it was important for Adams to have outstanding teams. Not being a jock, I still felt a part of all that. I was student manager for the football team all four years, the right-hand man to the head coach. And I made posters that went up around the high school building the week prior to each basketball game, to help build up enthusiasm. They purchased special poster-making supplies for me, the whole nine yards. It was regarded as a significant contribution, and that's quite a big deal for someone who's not a jock.

It wasn't until I was a senior, second semester, that I actually had a study hall, because I always had every minute of school filled up with something. I often had to split band and art classes because both sides were saying, "Mark, we need you!" I saw myself going to school to prepare for other things, not knowing specifically what, but it was all in preparation for something else. Mrs. Harrold, my trig and geometry teacher, could be a feisty, unyielding person to other people, but I always thought of her as someone who would not accept less than your best. Mrs. Knowles, my choral teacher in high school, was a godsend. Under her wing, I got my love of classical music—my first and last love—and the sense that you are what you set your mind to be.

I lived a totally celibate life in college, and I have a certain amount of regret about that. I was so dead-set on getting that 4.0 GPA that everything else was out of the picture. I just hammered away at it, relentlessly. I might have been dodging the issue too—kind of like I needed to resolve one issue at a time. The first issue was my career, or purpose in life, and after I got my first job I was permitted the freedom to pursue the other aspects of my life. That's one thing that's been out of sync in my life—the ability to juggle several things at one time.

A lot of gay people spend their lives just grazing the surface. Then there are the over-achievers, who have a subconscious need to prove their worth

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Mark Vanderbeek, age three, and his sisters, *left,* Sandy, and Pat. Courtesy of Sandy Coorts.

in society. I tend to be an over-achiever. At times it's a blessing and at times it's a curse, but I don't want anyone at work to ever have reason to say, "Not only is he gay, but he doesn't do above and beyond the call of duty." You can call me a faggot, you can call me any slur you want to, but don't ever call me a sluff-off or someone who doesn't put out 110 percent. It's definitely a trait I picked up from my father. He would say, "Count your blessings for every day you can work."

Growing up in a small community, I had a strong sense of identity—the farm, the small town, the small school. I've heard other people say that

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when they realized they were gay, they felt like they must be freaks of nature. But being gay never really caused me great inner conflict, because I've always had a fairly strong sense of who I am. I'm an Adams kid, I go to Adams school. When I was in doubt or turmoil about something, I had those things to prop me up and tell me, "Hey, you're okay. This issue will be resolved."

I grew up in quite ordinary circumstances and the most "wholesome" of settings. I always knew I was gay, I've always been comfortable with it, and I certainly have no regrets about it. I've taken my lumps like everyone does, straight or gay or whatever, and I wouldn't trade places with anyone. I've gotten this far to understand who I am. I would just as soon stay on track and find out what's ahead. Despite what people in New York or Los Angeles might say, I don't consider Nebraska the middle of nowhere. I think the Midwest is a wonderful place to be. Omaha is like a second home to me, other than Adams. It's very much a sense-of-community type city, the focal point being Omaha, with the suburbs looking to it. I feel a little lost in Kansas City, with the core city kind of languishing and the suburbs taking over. Not having that core to identify with is kind of baffling to me.

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