

‘Brokeback’ heartbreak hits close to home

By Brenda Cooper

I saw *Brokeback Mountain* this weekend. After reading Annie Proulx’s powerful short story over the holidays, I was looking forward to seeing the film version. And after Utah Jazz owner Larry H. Miller pulled the movie from his cinema, and the ensuing controversy that once again garnered unwelcome international attention to Utah’s ultra conservative culture, I was even more eager to make my own statement about tolerance and diversity by supporting the film when it opened in Cache Valley. After all, I’m one of Utah’s most endangered species—an openly liberal Democrat in the reddest state in the nation.

It wasn’t the film that surprised me. *Brokeback Mountain* is, like Proulx’s story, a powerful and hart-breaking tale story of ill-fated love and lost opportunities. What did surprise me was my own emotional response to the film. Seeing Jack and Ennis on the screen took me back to my brother Woody, and his great love affair with Jimmy (not his real name; he may still be in the closet), whom he met while in the Army in Germany in the early 1960s.

I had not thought about their short-lived relationship for years, not since the early months after Woody died in 1995 of complications from AIDs, not even when I read “Brokeback Mountain.” But here I sat in rural Utah, watching a movie about two young cowboys who stumble upon each other and fall in love, despite assurances and denials to each other that they were not “like that.” And I saw in their story my brother.

Woody and Jimmy were in their early 20s when they met in the Army sometime around 1964. That makes them close to the same age as Jack and Ennis and situates them in the same era as *Brokeback Mountain*—the homophobic 1960s, when being a gay man was still considered a disease that could be cured with the right psychiatric therapy and drugs, or earnest prayers begging for God’s salvation. It was a time when bigotry and discrimination toward homosexuals was open and virulent and widely accepted.

Ironically, the reason Woody had joined the Army was a desperate attempt to prove he was a real man, to “cure” himself of his attraction to men. But he and Jimmy met and fell in love and, for that, both were dishonorably discharged. Like Jack in the movie, after he learns that Ennis and Alma had divorced, Woody was elated despite the disgrace of a dishonorable discharge. He naively thought it meant he and Jimmy no longer had to hide their love, and that they could make a life together. But Jimmy returned home to Seattle and refused to come out to his family and friends. Just like Ennis. Desperate, Woody scaped together the money to travel to Seattle to change his lover’s mind, but Jimmy was not willing to face the consequences of being a gay man in the homophobic society that was America in the early 1960s. He just couldn’t be “like that.”

Woody was devastated. He tried to kill himself, ending up alone in an emergency room. He flew back to Ohio after he was released, wrists in heavy bandages, and perhaps more unhappy than any other time in his life. I’ll never really know if Woody meant to kill himself or if slitting his wrists with razor blades was a desperate attempt to get Jimmy back. Whatever his reasons, my brother lost the great love of his life.

After losing Jimmy, Woody refused to go back in the closet or apologize for who he was or whom he loved. Joining the Army was his last attempt to make himself straight. Two previous attempts at marriages hadn’t worked either. Once he accepted who he was, Woody demanded the same unconditional acceptance from his friends and his family. He rarely found it.

After Woody died in 1995 and I was packing up his home, I found a photo of him and Jimmy taken when Woody first arrived in Seattle 30 years before. Both were beaming, but Woody’s smile included the hope for a life with Jimmy, much like Jack wanted with Ennis in *Brokeback Mountain*.

So I cried at the end of *Brokeback Mountain*, after keeping my guard up when I read Proulx’s story and throughout most of the movie. But next to me my friend was sobbing. Fran hugged me and whispered that she knew I had to be thinking of Woody. I could no longer hold back my tears. I cried—not for Jack and Ennis and the life they might have had together—but for Woody, who never found the love of his life again, though he never

stopped trying or dreaming about finding it.

Yet, despite all of the losses and discrimination and rejection he experienced during his 54 years, my brother remained unapologetic for who he was—a proud, loving, generous man who just happened to be gay. As the credits rolled, I cried for the life Woody never had, a life in which he would have been free to build a life with whomever he loved, a life in which he would have been accepted and appreciated and loved for who he was, not judged for rejecting what society demanded he should be.

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*This essay was published in *The Herald Journal*, Logan, Utah, January 23, 2006, p. A4*