Dr. Richard Isay, Who Fought Illness Tag for Gays, Dies at 77

By DENISE GRADY  JUNE 29, 2012

Dr. Richard A. Isay, a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and gay-rights advocate who did not admit to himself that he was gay until he was 40, married and a father, and who won a pitched battle to persuade his own profession to stop treating homosexuality as a disease, died on Thursday in Manhattan. He was 77.

The cause was cancer, said his son, David, the founder of StoryCorps, an oral-history project.

At his death, Dr. Isay (pronounced EYE-say) was a professor of psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College and a faculty member at the Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research.

“He changed the way the psychoanalytic world viewed the subject of homosexuality,” said Dr. Jack Drescher, a training and supervising analyst at the William Alanson White Institute in New York and the author of “Psychoanalytic Therapy and the Gay Man.” “He was a pioneer, a very brave man. He was attacked by psychoanalysts. He took a lot of flak.”

During the era in which Dr. Isay trained, homosexuality was viewed as a “lower level of psychological development,” Dr. Drescher said. It was something to be cured in therapy, and openly gay professionals were barred from training as analysts at institutions accredited by the American Psychoanalytic Association, the oldest
professorial group for analysts in the United States and one of the most influential, with many training institutes and affiliated societies.

Early in his career, Dr. Isay accepted the mainstream view. Troubled about his own sexuality, he thought psychoanalysis might help, and he had 10 years of therapy. In the early 1970s, soon after the analysis ended and he was supposedly “cured,” he realized, he said, that he was homosexual. By then, he had a wife and two sons.

For a time, he lived as a closeted gay man, but he worked with gay patients — helping them to accept themselves, not trying to turn them straight — and began writing about the idea that homosexuality was normal, not an illness or a matter of arrested development.

He did not tell his wife he was gay until 1980. They stayed married for another nine years to keep their family together, and they kept his sexuality a secret from their sons.

Dr. Isay continued to present his ideas at professional meetings, where he acknowledged that he was gay. Not only did some of his heterosexual colleagues attack his ideas, but they also stopped referring patients to him and suggested that he might need more therapy himself.

“I think he was hurt very badly by many colleagues,” Dr. Drescher said.

Even though the American Psychiatric Association stopped classifying homosexuality as a disease in 1973, many members of the American Psychoanalytic Association continued to regard it as an illness. Dr. Isay tried reasoning, badgering and other forms of persuasion for about 15 years, but the analysts held firm.

In 1992, backed by the American Civil Liberties Union, he threatened a lawsuit to force the association to promise not to discriminate against gay people. The group relented, issuing position statements that it would not discriminate in training, hiring or promoting analysts. It also formed committees to educate member institutions on its changed policies. Even so, some members still regarded homosexuality as something that therapy could change. But in 1997, the group became the first national mental health organization to support gay marriage.
By then Dr. Isay had long had a relationship with Gordon Harrell, an artist about 20 years younger than he. They met in 1979 but did not move in together until Dr. Isay’s marriage ended in 1989. They were married last year in Manhattan in the living room of Dr. Isay’s son Josh, a political consultant. A grandson was the best man.

In an essay published in The New York Times in November, Dr. Isay’s former wife, Jane (she remarried but continued to use his surname), referred to his coming out to her in 1980, when their sons were 10 and 14, as “the time when we faced a terrible choice and decided to stay married for the children.”

They had thought that their sons did not notice what she called their “incomplete marriage,” she wrote. But they were mistaken.

Their son David agreed, saying there were tensions and undercurrents that worsened over time.

Although Mr. Isay knew that his father had treated gay people and had written about homosexuality, he did not know until he was 21 that Dr. Isay himself was gay.

But, Mr. Isay added: “Before I knew he was gay, and after, he was basically the exact same person. He had a fierce sense of justice, hated phonies and always rooted for the underdog.”

Richard Alexander Isay was born on Dec. 13, 1934, in Pittsburgh. His father managed a steel mill. He graduated from Haverford College and the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry, completed his residency in psychiatry at Yale and trained at the Western New England Psychoanalytic Institute.

In addition to his sons and husband, he is survived by Ms. Isay, the former Jane Franzblau; a brother, Milton; and four grandchildren.

Dr. Richard A. Friedman, director of the psychopharmacology clinic at Weill Cornell Medical College, said that Dr. Isay had “made the field see that their view was based on ideology, not evidence.”

He said Dr. Isay could sometimes seem doctrinaire and a bit shrill, irritating to some, but he added: “You have to have passion to do what he did. He pushed the field to do what it should have done, and he did not stop. We’re all richer for it.”

**Correction: July 3, 2012**

An obituary on Saturday about Dr. Richard A. Isay, a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and gay-rights advocate, omitted one of his survivors. He is Dr. Isay’s brother, Milton.

A version of this article appears in print on June 30, 2012, on Page B8 of the New York edition with the headline: Dr. Richard Isay, 77, Dies; Fought Illness Tag for Gays.

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