

Resource center founder dies from pneumonia

Tireless volunteer James B. Knox co-founded two West Mich. resource centers

BY BENJAMIN JENKINS

KALAMAZOO— James B. Knox died of pneumonia on Monday, June 27. Knox was a co-founder of the Kalamazoo Gay and Lesbian Resource Center and also a co-founder of the Community AIDS Resource and Education Services. He was 64.

Knox's friends say his passion and work for the LGBT and AIDS awareness movements has been essential not only to CARES and the KGLRC, but to Michigan's LGBT community.

After studying theater at Purdue University, Knox moved to Kalamazoo and applied to work with the Barn Theatre in Augusta, Mich. in 1969. Initially Knox wanted to act, but Barn Theatre producer Brendan Ragotzy said Knox eventually started making props.

"He had a very keen eye," Ragotzy said. In 1970, Knox helped make the props for a Man of La Mancha performance, and those same props are being used in this summer's production of the show.

In 1985, Knox lost a close friend to HIV. Knox started talking with friends about ways to help people who were suffering with the disease. By 1986, Knox became a founder of CARES, which at the time was called Kalamazoo AIDS Resource and Education Services.

That year, openly gay Kalamazoo resident Harry Wayne Watson was bludgeoned to death with a sledgehammer by 17-year-old Terry Kerr. When prosecuted, Kerr used the "gay panic defense," claiming Watson made sexual advances. Kerr was found innocent of manslaughter.

Knox's friends say this is what caused him to form the KGLRC. "When Watson was murdered and no one was convicted, Jimmy found himself picketing the courthouse. Then, out of nowhere, somebody handed him a microphone," said Ron Kowalski, close friend and founding member of the KGLRC. "I always referred to him as the accidental activist."

In 1988, Knox, Kowalski and some volunteers created a helpline for gays and lesbians in Kalamazoo. Using Knox's home phone line, they forwarded callers to members of the newly formed KGLRC. Operators would talk with callers and refer them to doctors, psychologists and lawyers using a compiled gay and lesbian resource guide. "He did a lot financially to keep that helpline going. I don't think the resource center would exist today if it wasn't for what he started 23 years ago," said Kowalski.

On October 1, 1991, Knox's 37-year-old partner William Esman was found murdered in the Kleinstuck Preserve of Kalamazoo. The case was never solved.

Knox stayed heavily involved in CARES and the KGLRC. "At one time or another Jim has held every single office on that board," former KGLRC board president Tom Seiler said. "He's been involved with the center in one capacity or another throughout its entire history."

Knox was also the board president at CARES for 20 years. When many founding members had moved or "fallen off," said CARES Executive Director David Feaster, "He remained involved. He was one of the few who stayed around."

"Jim was not given to histrionics, or bombast. He was always there, he always was prepared with good advice and he never stepped back from the fight. And it was never about Jim; it was always about the cause. That's one thing that made him so incredibly valuable to us," Seiler said. "We're not going to see his like again. Because of his many years of service, he became our institutional memory. I have not yet put together what that loss is going to mean to us."

CARES, KGLRC and the Barn Theatre are having a memorial service for Knox on Saturday, July 9 from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. at the Barn Theatre, located at 13351 M-96 in Augusta, Mich.



Photo of CARES and KGLRC co-founder James B. Knox provided by David Feaster.

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