

Jim Yancey and Jack Durham: 2021 Recipients of the Leadership Award



We are pleased to announce the recipient of the 2021 Leadership Award from the Center for Health and Hope: Jack Durham and Jim Yancey. This award for longtime advocacy and support for people living with HIV will be presented this Sunday, October 3 at The Red Concert: An AIDS Benefit for the Tucson Interfaith HIV/AIDS Network (TIHAN), and the Center. The concert and award presentation takes place on the outside stage at Monterey Court on Sunday at 6pm.

This year's concert will feature the band GOOD TROUBLE, and the choice of band fits well with our choice of award recipients. Our award recipients Jim and Jack have a long history of activism, dating back to the actual Stonewall Riots.

Jim and Jack have been together for 18 years, and travelled to California to get married in 2008 when it became legal in that state. Each of them knew they were gay when they were growing up, at a time that this was not well accepted.

Jack grew up in Baltimore, and was blessed to have a mother who had gay friends. Her acknowledgment of knowing Jack was gay came on his 21st birthday, when she dropped off Jack at a local gay bar and encouraged him to meet people. The following year, Jack heard news that a group of lesbian women, gay men, and trans activists were fighting back against the police who were raiding NYC's Stonewall Inn. After hearing about the first night of riots, Jack and his friends jumped into their car, drove to NYC, and took part in the ongoing riots in front of the Stonewall Inn. They had experienced some of the same police tactics in Baltimore—police blackmailing owners of gay bars, and raiding their hangouts and arresting bar patrons. "We learned we always had to go out only with friends, never alone," he remembers, "because the undercover vice cops were known for arresting people and accusing them of solicitation with no provocation whatsoever. They were just out to get us."

Jack and his mom marched in the protest parade (later to be known as the pride march) on the two-year anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising. She carried a sign that read "My son is gay and that's ok," shocking local media. Public support from parents was still rare, and a picture of Jack and his mom made the television news, and Time magazine. The pastor of their Methodist church saw the media coverage, Jack recalls, and shortly thereafter made a point two Sundays in a row to condemn gay people from the pulpit. In the middle of the service the second week, Jack stood up, said a few words to the pastor, and walked out, leaving that church and the denomination. And his mom followed.

Jack had heard about the Rev Troy Perry, who had formed the first denomination to embrace gay people, a radical concept at that time, and he and his mom joined the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). As the denomination grew, many of its churches were subjected to hate and violence. Both Jack and his mother would eventually become deacons in their own MCC churches.

With the appearance of AIDS in 1981, MCC congregations were among the first to set up ministries to help people with the disease. Jack and his mom participated in teams visiting people dying of AIDS in hospitals. "Some people thought we were crazy. We would go to their ridiculous extremes to gown up just to visit. We were there to hold their hands when no one else would. Someone had to."

Jack's stories abound: the origins of a scar on his head from a police baton at a bar raid, being followed and watched as a "gay subversive," being arrested after chaining himself to the Liberty Bell to protest

discrimination against gay people, protesting the murders of people killed because of their sexual orientation or gender expression, losing far too many friends to AIDS.... One of Jack's favorite stories involves he and his mom meeting Anita Bryant at an anti-gay rally—apparently, she saw Jack and his mom at the rally and wanted to meet them, only to be told by Jack's mom: "I'm only here to support my gay son, and what you are doing is wrong, and your quoting the Bible is wrong." They were quickly escorted away from the famous anti-gay crusader.

Jim, too, has a long history of involvement in advocacy and support, getting into "good trouble." Growing up in Durham, North Carolina, Jim left his family's Baptist church because of their intolerance. As AIDS ravaged the gay community in the 1980's, Jim was living in Washington DC, and lost his best friend and roommate to the disease. He participated in many marches and protests, including some organized by the radical group ACT UP. "I remember one gay pride parade in DC. The cops were wearing long yellow gloves, supposedly to protect themselves from catching AIDS from the people marching. So we donned our own yellow gloves to make fun of their bigotry, and marched through the crowds waving and showing the idiocy of those police."

When Jack and Jim met in Tucson in 2003, Jack introduced Jim to a welcoming congregation, the local MCC church. They found out about TIHAN, and started volunteering with TIHAN's Poz Café lunch program for people living with HIV. They helped fundraise money for the church to help with TIHAN by having drag shows ("gender benders"). One of their social groups, the Bears of the Old Pueblo, also began participating in fundraising for TIHAN, with Jim and Jack and other bears donning drag to raise funds at Turnabout for TIHAN benefits.

Jim volunteered with TIHAN in the office, and also served as TIHAN's liaison with the church for more than a decade, organizing benefits and recruiting volunteers to help with Poz Café. Unhappy with some changes in the local MCC church, they left the congregation, which soon thereafter disaffiliated with the MCC denomination. Jim and Jack quickly found a new church home at St. Francis in the Foothills United Methodist Church, and have continued to be very active supporters of TIHAN and key advocates for HIV awareness and support.

For their decades of causing "good trouble" and working to end homophobia and HIV stigma, and building support systems for people with HIV, TIHAN and the Center for Health and Hope are proud to present the 2021 Leadership Award to Jim Yancey and Jack Durham.

Please join us at the benefit concert this Sunday as we present the official award.