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GAY | LESBIAN | BISEXUAL & TRANSGENDER NEWSMAGAZINE

30 Years in the Making: Center LB Celebrates a Generation of Outreach

By Johnny Wazney
johnny@gayblade.com

The Gay and Lesbian Center of Greater Long Beach is aging gracefully as it commemorates its 30th birthday. Founded March 25, 1980 — at the height of the AIDS epidemic — the Center has become the bedrock of community activism and assistance for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people living in Long Beach, and each of its services falls within the organization's "Four Core Service Areas": information and education; health and well-being; social and cultural activities; and social justice.

However, with the plethora of services comes the never-ending requirement of money to fund them, and the Center has decided there's no better way to celebrate its birthday than to hold a Beach Bash fundraiser for everyone who has benefitted from and helped expand the Center LB's programs. A happy hour kicks off the night with refreshments at sunset — followed by a barbecue dinner — but the celebration stands apart from other annual Center galas.

"This event is not about honoring a politician or a celebrity; it is about celebrating and honoring the Center's 30 years," said Ron Sylvester, chairman of the board of directors of the Center LB. "The past is the past; things and people change." With retrospection centered on its roots, he added, the Center LB continues to carry forward what began more than 30 years ago was only the beginning. Originally launched as One in Long Beach, the Center LB actually started in 1977, when a group of gays and lesbians, influenced by other civil rights movements, held "living room gatherings to discuss issues important to the gay and lesbian community."

In 1980, the meetings were incorporated as One in Long Beach to continue fostering this community dialogue. According to the Center's Web site, "One in Long Beach was, in many instances, the only safe haven where people of all sexual orientations, ethnic and cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic levels could receive HIV information, testing and counseling, healthcare referrals and other support services."

In 1984, the organization established Project Ahead, the first case-management service in Southern L.A. County exclusively for gay men with HIV and AIDS. A year later, with the help of endowments from people who died of HIV and AIDS, the former Security First National Bank building on Fourth and Cherry was purchased to give the meetings and services a permanent home.

Today, more than 30 years after its inception, the Center resides in a 7,500-square-foot location that has helped the living-room discussions evolve into an organization promoting outreach and education for more than 21,000 people each year.

Each member of the community is touched through the numerous services the Center provides. Support groups, legal assistance, employment referrals, youth services, a hate-crimes hotline, mental-health referrals and women's health programs are but a few of the services offered. More than 40 groups hold monthly meetings at the Center, and it also remains active in the fight for marriage equality and HIV awareness.

Although it has yet to finish blowing out its birthday candle, the

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Center already is focusing on its future projects. The housing needs of the growing LGBT senior community are on the Center's radar, said Sylvester. Anticipating the needs of the aging community is an imperative ingredient of the Center's proactive culture and willingness to address potential services, he added.

Long Beach's LGBT community has come a long way since the birth of the Center; still, a hate-crimes hotline is needed, the community continues to lose people to HIV and AIDS, and marriage equality remains hotly contested — all issues ensuring that the Center will continue to be a vital part of the community for years to come.

The Center LB's Beach Bash takes place July 31, from 5 - 10 p.m., at Alfredo's Beach Club, located at Ocean and Granada in Long Beach. Tickets are available for \$45 online, or for \$55 at the door. For more information, visit www.centerlb.org.

The Orange County & Long Beach Blade newsmagazine is published monthly for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community of Southern California. Contributions of news tips, stories and photographs are welcome. Publication of the name or photographs of any person or organization in articles or advertising in the OC/LB Blade is not to be construed as any indication of the sexual orientation or HIV/AIDS status of such person or organization. The official views and opinions of the OC/LB Blade staff are expressed solely in editorials and commentaries. Opinions and views expressed in columns, letters, articles and cartoons are those of the writers and artists, and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the OC/LB Blade. "Letters to the Editor" will be edited for length and clarity. The OC/LB Blade is distributed free at many entertainment spots, retail establishments as well as organizational and professional offices throughout California. Call the OC/LB Blade for locations at the above number. Subscriptions are available at \$25 for 12 months by sending a check or money order to the above address. © 2009 by the OC/LB Blade. No portion of the publication may be reproduced, either in whole or in part, without permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.