



# *Harriet Hancock*

*Mother of SC Pride*

Becci Robbins



*Harriet Hancock and  
her son, Greg Hancock*



## Thank you

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Mandy Carter  
Kyle Criminger  
Bert Easter  
Bill Edens  
Greg Hancock  
Harriet Hancock  
Karen Hancock Klocko  
Dr. Ed Madden  
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**H**arriet Hancock has braved the mean trenches of America's culture wars for more than 30 years.

Armed with her clipboard and unrelenting optimism, she spearheaded South Carolina's gay rights movement at a time when that carried real risk.

Hate mail. Lost friends.  
The judgment of neighbors.  
Late-night calls from threatening strangers.  
Condemnation from the church.

At first glance, she might seem an unlikely conscript, but appearances can be deceiving. Under that stylish exterior beats the heart of a true warrior.

Harriet was fighting for the gay community before it coined the acronym LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender). She joined the battle to defend her son Greg, who came out to her in 1981, but she stayed for his friends and their families, who would become hers.

Back then, there was no map for the road she was traveling. She read the books Greg recommended, and talked to him with an open heart and mind. Suspecting that other parents might benefit from her experience, Harriet started a chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) in Columbia, the first in the Southeast. It was a bold move, given the hostile climate. "I was afraid someone was going to burn a cross on my lawn," she said.

It was the beginning of her life as an advocate for some of South Carolina's most vulnerable and vilified citizens.

In 1985, during the early, dark days of the AIDS crisis—when a diagnosis was a death sentence—Harriet helped establish Palmetto AIDS Life Support Services (PALSS) to meet the critical needs of

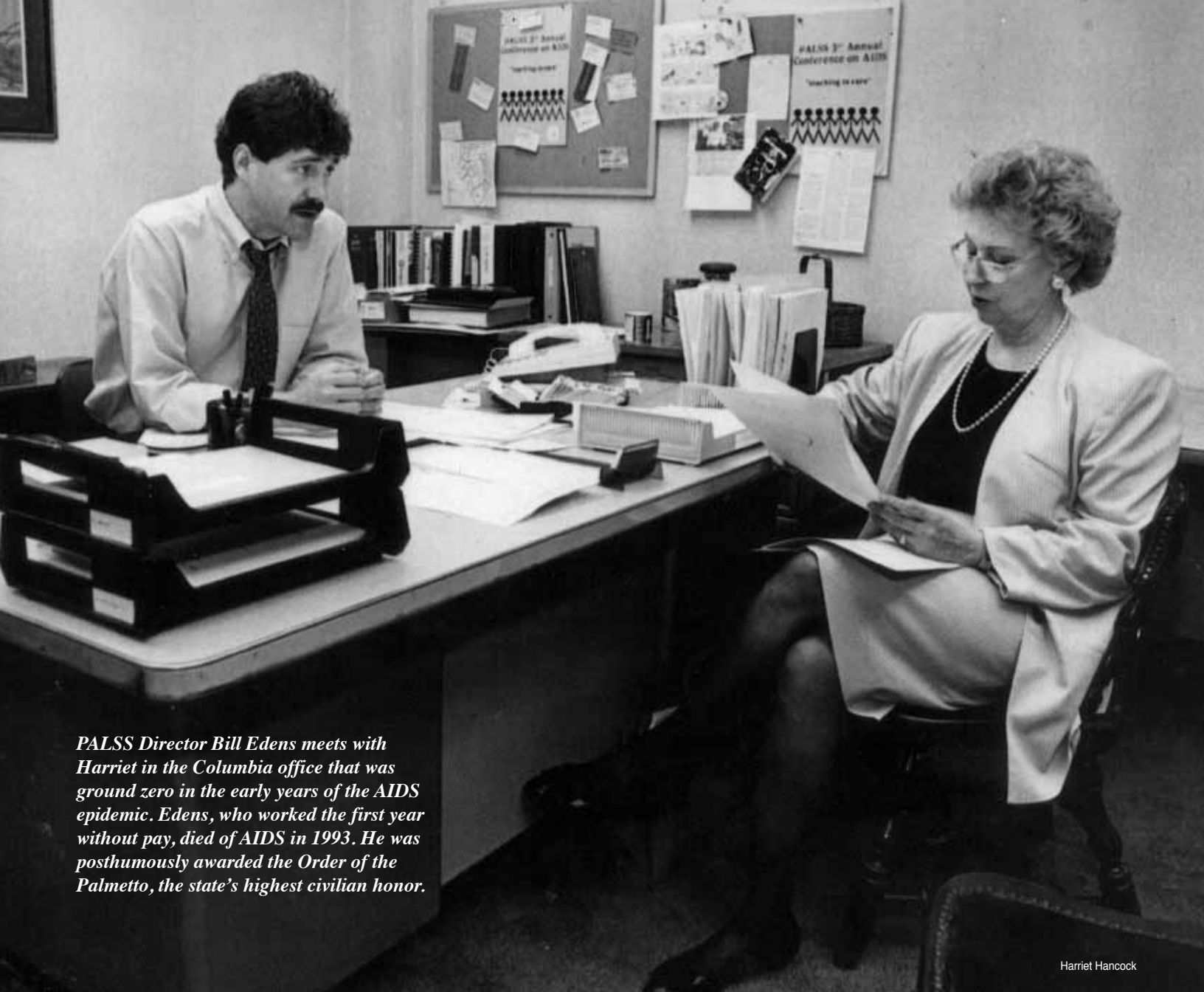
people living with HIV in a state that was slow to respond to the pandemic.

PALSS was chronically underfunded, the case load overwhelming, and the work emotionally crushing. A driven staff and an army of trained volunteers provided practical and emotional support to some of the state's most critical patients. They soldiered on, knowing that if they didn't do it nobody else would.

In an effort to challenge stigma and stereotypes, Harriet led organizing efforts for South Carolina's first gay Pride march, held on a muggy June morning in 1990. Holding her son's hand, she led 2,000 marchers down Main Street and onto the State House grounds. Columbia had never seen anything like it.

The night before, Harriet was awakened by a phone call from a man who warned that there would be blood in the streets and it would be her fault. The call shook her, but didn't stop her.

Nothing has. Over the years, she has testified in court and in the legislature, has marched and rallied, written letters and living wills, and raised money and awareness. She has called in to talk shows and called out lawmakers. She has served countless hours on panels, boards and committees. And for all those public



*PALSS Director Bill Edens meets with Harriet in the Columbia office that was ground zero in the early years of the AIDS epidemic. Edens, who worked the first year without pay, died of AIDS in 1993. He was posthumously awarded the Order of the Palmetto, the state's highest civilian honor.*

acts, there have been untold private ones spent parenting the motherless, tending the sick, and mourning the dead.

But of all her acts of courage, perhaps the bravest was when she finally decided to leave a violent husband, packing her children into the family station wagon in the middle of the night and going into hiding.

In hindsight, it was the defining decision of her life, the singular act from which so much good came. She couldn't know it then, but when she finally stood up for herself, she made it possible for many others to do the same—including her son, who said he doubts he would have come out if it meant facing his father's wrath.

## Carolina Girl

Harriet was born on Sept. 25, 1936, into a middle-class family in Columbia, the second of four children. Her father, Adam Daniels, was a tire salesman from Columbia. Her mother, Elizabeth McCabe Daniels, worked full-time in a department store.

Although she appreciated the new clothes her mother's job afforded, Harriet wished for a mother like her friends had, there when she returned from school. Instead, she and her sister were charged with caring for their younger siblings while their parents worked. While she may not have liked the arrangement, her mother's example surely shaped Harriet's ideas about women's ability to make their own way in the world.

Harriet credits her father with teaching her to recognize the humanity in all people. "He was a great man," she said,

"one of the kindest, most giving people in the world. Even though we were not wealthy, we shared what we had. I like to think I'm like him."

Educated in segregated schools but the daughter of parents who taught her that she was no better than anyone else, Harriet was sensitive to race and the privilege that granted—or denied.

"I was raised in the South in a time when you had separate drinking fountains for whites and blacks, and I always rebelled against that," she said. "I can remember when blacks had to sit in the back of the bus, and I'd get on and sit in the back with them. The bus driver would put me off. So I started early on, I guess."

She graduated from Columbia High School in 1954. Her yearbook, filled exclusively with white faces, is signed by friends who call her "sweet" and "cute" and "swell." She was a member of the Glee Club and Junior Homemakers of America. There is no hint of the woman she would become—except this: the quote under her name that reads "*The hand that hath made you fair hath made you good.*"



*Diane (left) and Harriet (holding her hand) at the church next door to their grandmother's house on Huger Street in Columbia.*



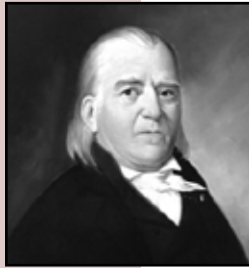
*Elizabeth McCabe Daniels worked outside the home in an era when that was not the norm. Pictured here (from left) are her children Diane, Walter, and Harriet. Her youngest, Hylon, was born after this portrait was made.*

## Harriet Hancock's ancestors were South Carolina patriots and pioneers

**H**arriet's family tree is deeply rooted in the Carolina soil. On her maternal side, she is a descendant of Col. Thomas Taylor, a Revolutionary War patriot known as the father of Columbia.

“The Taylor family’s plantation, ‘The Plains,’ was located on much of what became the city of Columbia in 1786,” said John Sherrer of Historic Columbia. “The family’s house once stood at the intersection of Barnwell and Richland streets, and is featured in the 1872 bird’s-eye map of Columbia. Hampton Street formerly was called Plain Street to acknowledge the family’s former holdings.”

Taylor was a key architect in designing Columbia, one of the country’s first planned cities. His plantation was the site of many gatherings and celebrations, noted Edwin L. Green in his 1932 book *A History of Richland County*. “Thomas Taylor was one of the most influential men in this section of



*Col. Thomas Taylor*

the State. He was a member of the first and second provincial congresses, and was appointed a justice of the peace for the Camden District in 1776. He joined Col. Thomas Sumter as captain after the fall of Charlestown. He also served in the militia during 1779.

“When Col. Sumter was surprised at Fishing Creek, Taylor was captured and wounded with a sabre after he surrendered, but managed to escape as they were being marched to Camden.”

The paternal side of Harriet’s family also were early settlers in the Midlands, tracing back to Thomas Harwell, a Virginia native who bought a 640-acre parcel on the western side of Gills Creek to establish a homestead in 1784.

In “The Heirs of Harwell,” Mark J. Lynn writes, “The life and background of Thomas Harwell is shrouded in mystery. Although Harwell

had prominent neighbors, especially the Hampton and Taylor families, he did not appear in the limelight.”

Legend has it that while cleaning his musket he accidentally shot and killed his sister. He laid her to rest on a grassy knoll overlooking a pond. That land came to be known as Kelly Cemetery, one of the oldest burial sites in Richland County and among the largest family cemeteries in the state, with more than 400 graves.

Many of Harriet’s ancestors are buried there, in what Lynn describes as “a small spot of serenity in the midst of a busy city. The famed Southern writer James Dickey, who lived nearby, was known to stroll through from time to time.” 📍





At the tender age of 18 and fresh out of school, Harriet married Marion Hancock, who had just returned from a Navy deployment in Korea. After he graduated in 1959 from the University of South Carolina with an engineering degree, he took a job with the electronics company RCA in New Jersey.



The days were bright and full of promise.

It was, Harriet recalls, a happy time in their lives. “Cocoa Beach was like a boom town. It was so carefree, like living a long vacation. It was exciting.”

Many ticket-holders didn’t make it to the Gator Bowl, where the band refused to perform until the promoter agreed to allow a mixed crowd. “We never play to segregated audiences,” John Lennon told reporters. (Karen remembers her mother calling 16 years later, when Lennon was murdered. “She was heartbroken.”)

The move challenged Harriet’s sheltered, small-town sensibilities. She said, “I had never seen a traffic circle.” She was, she discovered, quite naïve. “I think moving was the best thing to happen to me, because it broadened my views about a lot of things. People at RCA were from all over the country.



Greg’s earliest memories are from Florida, where the family was part of a tight-knit community from RCA. “Those were the good years,” he said, remembering his parents in the prime of their lives. “In the 60s, they were young and beautiful. They were working on the space program. They built bonfires on the beach and watched the launches.”

“I had been educated in South Carolina, which didn’t necessarily tell the truth about the Civil War. So when I went up North, I thought I was going to the land where people were horrible, only to find out I was really wrong.”

When the family moved to Florida in 1961, they had two small children—Karen, then 6, and 1-year-old Greg.



Karen also remembers those years with fondness. Among her memories is the time Harriet took her to see The Beatles on their first U.S. tour. Karen was in second grade. They drove three hours, just the two of them, under tense conditions. The concert had been delayed after a major hurricane hit Florida.



photos courtesy of Harriet Hancock

*Adam Daniels with daughters Harriet and Diane*



*Harriet  
and Greg,  
Cocoa  
Beach,  
Florida,  
1961*

Harriet Hancock

The easy, sunny days in Florida would dim, the good times becoming less frequent as Harriet's husband spiraled deeper into alcoholism. As the illness worsened, his behavior became more erratic, his mood more volatile and dangerous.

The family hid their problems. "This was the 1970s, when alcoholism was thought to affect Skid Row bums, not people in the suburbs," Karen said. "It was our dirty little secret."

"Things gradually deteriorated," Harriet said. "The kids walked on eggshells because you could never tell what he was going to do."

"It was always tense," Greg said. "We were always waiting for the other shoe to drop, the other plate to fly off the table." The unpredictability was exhausting.

"I don't mean to sound dramatic," he said, "but it had gotten so bad we knew we probably weren't going to get out of there alive."

Greg had played the role of the family peacemaker. "I was Mom's defender," he



*Satellite Beach, Florida*

said. "A lot of the violence of my father was directed at my mother—unless we got in the way. So when we left, it was a relief. I didn't care where we stayed."

When Harriet finally left, her third child, Jennifer, was 11. Karen was in college, and Greg was in high school. Her husband was beyond reach.

"I had done all I could to help him," Harriet said. "I left and came back home

to Columbia a broken person. I had to save myself and my kids."

Karen is proud of her mother's resolve and resilience during a time when there were few resources for battered women. "When she left, she had no money, no skills, nobody to help her. She struggled. I don't know how she did it."

Harriet's only job experience was working as a hairdresser to help put her husband through college. She had wanted to go herself, but her husband's insecurity dashed any of her aspirations that might threaten his control. "He was the jealous, insecure type," she said.

After he died, succumbing to alcoholism not long after Harriet left, she had the money and the freedom to go to college. “I couldn’t wait to go back to school,” she said. “Things were not easy, but I loved every minute of it. Greg was in school at the same time. We had a botany class together. I thought it was great; he thought it was his worst nightmare.”

Harriet excelled in college, making the dean’s list, earning a scholarship, and graduating *magna cum laude* from the University of South Carolina in 1984 with a degree in sociology.

She would find law school more challenging. “It was difficult and competitive,” she said. She struggled her first year, then found her stride. “There’s this saying that the first year you’re scared to death, the second year you’re worried to death, and by the third year you’re bored to death—ready to get out.”

### “Mom, I’m Gay.”

Harriet remembers the night in 1981 when Greg finally found the courage to say, “Mom, I’m gay.”

“I could see tears welling up in his eyes,” she said. “He was hurting so bad I had to say something to diffuse the situation. So I said, ‘Is that all? I thought you wrecked

the car.’ We hugged, we talked, we cried. We stayed up half the night reassuring each other.”

Three words, and the family they once knew ceased to be. The trajectory of their lives was about to change in ways they could never have imagined.

Harriet tried to downplay the shock of the moment, but Greg suspected that she was just trying to protect him. “She was worried about what the world was going to do to her child,” he said. “But she took time to educate herself.”

Greg had come out earlier to his aunt Diane—Harriet’s broad-minded sister—who kept his confidence for a year. “She kept trying to fix me up with girls,” he said, “and I got so tired of going on those dates, I had to tell my aunt so she’d stop setting me up.”

Diane wasn’t the first in the family to know; Jennifer had already found out. After moving to Columbia, she fell in with a circle of friends who, like her, didn’t fit in. The group included a gay boy who let it slip that Greg was gay, too.

When she told her brother what she’d discovered, Jennifer said, “He looked like a deer in the headlights.”

They struck a deal. She promised to keep his secret if he granted her access to his bedroom and its perks: a vast music collection and stash of art supplies. “I was 12 years old with dirt on my older sibling,” Jennifer said. “Wouldn’t you blackmail him?”



Karen was away at college and newly married when Greg came out. Not knowing what to do, she wrote “I Love You” on an envelope and mailed it to her brother.

After the family had time to process the fact that Greg was gay—Harriet compares it to the stages of death—they came together in a united front to protect him, becoming his strongest allies.

While her love for him never wavered, Harriet was anxious when Greg first came out, afraid of how others might treat him. “I worried that he would have no friends. He assured me that he did, that gay folks who had been shunned by

their families come together to create their own family. And, sure enough, it turned out he did have a family.”

Harriet grew to love Greg’s friends, and was grieved by their stories of being bullied at school, unwelcome in their churches, even banished from their own homes. She said, “They would say things like, ‘You’re the best mom in the world. My mother doesn’t accept me. What can you do to help her understand?’”

It was a question she took to heart. She began looking for a way to help the families of gay people by sharing what she had learned in the process of coming to terms with her son. “There was a tremendous need,” she said.

She discovered the national organization PFLAG, dedicated to educating and supporting the families of gays and lesbians, and decided to start a chapter in Columbia in 1980. It was a risky move, considering the times.

After the local newspaper ran a story on Harriet’s plans, she said her phone started ringing. “They were teachers, health care workers, ministers. More of the calls were positive than negative.”

The first PFLAG meeting was held on a Sunday afternoon at Harriet’s house. It

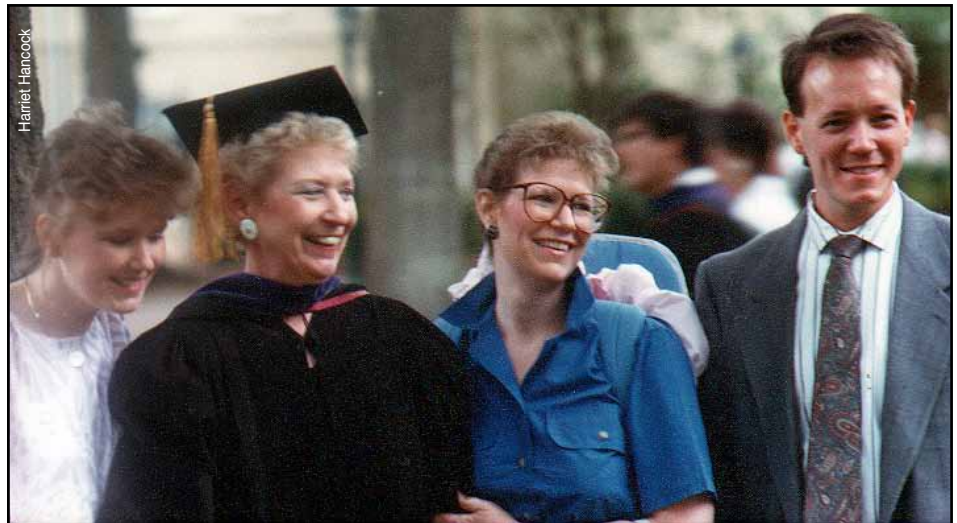
was supposed to last an hour, but at 7 o’clock the guests were still in her living room. “I told my sister ‘I think we need to feed these people, because they’re not going home.’ It was the first time they had anyone to talk to about this. Some of them were sharing for the first time in their lives. It was wonderful.”

North Carolina gay rights activist Mandy Carter, who cofounded the regional LGBT organization Southerners On New Ground (SONG), mentored Harriet in her early years as a community organizer. Carter said that—as straight people—the

parents of gay children come closest to understanding what it means to be gay in America.

Parents have a unique perspective and platform when it comes to advocating for gay rights, Carter said. She is moved by the parents who stand by their children.

She said, “Every time I am at Pride and I see someone in a T-shirt that says ‘I love my gay son’ or ‘I love my lesbian daughter,’ I get tears because these are people saying ‘This is me, too,’ and ‘I’m willing to put myself on the line.’”



*Harriet celebrates her graduation from the University of South Carolina School of Law in 1988 with her children Jennifer, Karen and Greg.*

“And when I think about Harriet and people like her in the South—are you kidding me? It’s profound. Unbelievable.”

Carter’s admiration for her friend of three decades is clear. “Who knew when PFLAG first started the impact it would have? It was a game changer—the first in the Southeast was in Columbia, South Carolina. It’s remarkable.”

Harriet said, “I know that we have helped many families in their time of crisis, and have literally changed hearts and minds. PFLAG was the beginning of many things to come and the most rewarding work that anyone could be engaged in.”

The “things to come” were about to get a whole lot tougher.

## AIDS Crisis Hits South Carolina

In the late 1970s, health care workers noted a mysterious group of infections and cancers spreading among gay men in urban America. By the mid-1980s, the Centers for Disease Control identified the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) as the cause of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), a diagnosis that for years to come was a death sentence.

**L**ike most chapters of **Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays**, the Spartanburg group was started by the mother of a gay son. But Liz Patterson was more high profile than most. The only S.C. woman elected to Congress, she spent six years representing the Upstate. A Democrat in a heavily Republican county, she served on County Council, in the Senate and three terms in the House.

**Born Elizabeth Johnston, politics was in her DNA. Her father was Olin D. Johnston, South Carolina governor in the 1930s and long-term member of the U.S. Senate.**



*Former Congresswoman Liz Patterson (right) is the daughter of Gov. Olin D. Johnston and mother of Pat Patterson, who performs in drag as Patti O’Furniture.*

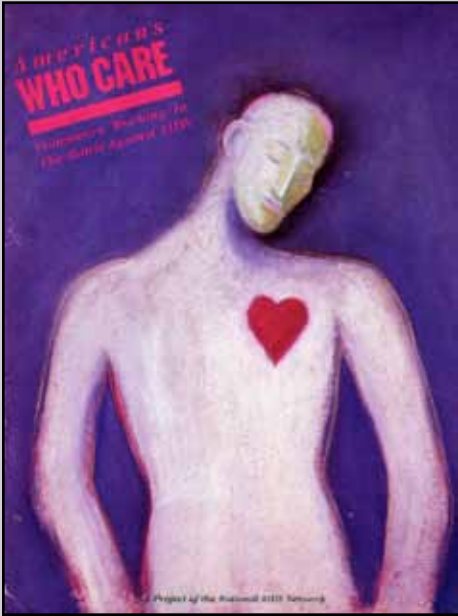
**Patterson didn’t always champion gay rights. While she was running for lieutenant governor, she didn’t support laws allowing gay couples to adopt or serve openly in the military. That was before her son Pat came out at age 23. When he did, Patterson responded by educating herself on LGBT issues.**

**Liz Patterson now speaks at public events with great passion about gay equality. It is that sort of personal and political evolution that lies at the heart of Harriet’s work.**

**Since 1998, Pat Patterson has been performing as Patti O’Furniture (a nod to Irish roots) to benefit community groups, including the Gay & Lesbian Business Guild, the AIDS Benefit Foundation, and PALSS. ☉**



*Patti O’Furniture*



*Harriet was profiled in this 1987 booklet by the National AIDS Network to honor volunteers on the front lines. The entry about her begins, “As our fight against AIDS grows into crisis proportions, the people of South Carolina will need to thank the tireless energy and compassionate vision of one woman, Harriet Hancock, for our readiness to meet the challenge.”*

*It ends, “She is presently a PALSS buddy to a 13-month-old infant and its mother, as well as helping with a 7-year-old with AIDS who was abandoned by his family. Most importantly, she continues to be adopted mother to countless of the scared and hurting.”*

In 1984, Harriet attended a national meeting of PFLAG in Denver, and was alarmed by all the talk about this frightening new disease. She met parents who already had lost sons. “I thought about my own son,” she said. “Is he going to die? It really scared me, and I wondered what we were going to do when it comes to South Carolina.”

When she got home, she wrote letters to hospitals offering help. “We already knew people were being turned away by their families,” she said. She was soon put in touch with a young man in Lancaster who was facing AIDS alone. Harriet and a few friends from the Metropolitan Community Church created a support circle to help him.

It was the first time Harriet would become close to someone only to watch them die. It would be far from the last.

By the summer of 1985, with 46 reported cases in the state, it became impossible to ignore the grim handwriting on the wall. AIDS was spreading in South Carolina, and the state was ill-prepared for the coming crisis.

Fear and ignorance clouded public policy decisions, with some lawmakers calling for extreme measures, including tattoos and quarantine for people with HIV.

The state health department instituted a system of tracking patients and their partners. Because testing wasn’t anonymous, people avoided getting checked, compounding the epidemic by putting yet more people at risk.

South Carolina’s health care and social service system were woefully unprepared. To help fill the gap in services, Harriet and core allies began meeting to create a group to offer practical and emotional support to patients and their families. Among them were Fred and Ethel Aldridge, whose son had died of AIDS. Their loss was made more painful by hospital workers who refused to properly care for him.

“Ethel told us of the ignorance and stigma associated with AIDS,” Harriet said, “how food trays were left outside her son’s hospital room; garbage not emptied; his bed not changed; how she was afraid to leave him for fear that no one would take care of him. They were with us because they never wanted another family to suffer as they had.”

They founded Palmetto AIDS Life Support Services in Columbia. “PALSS was born out of concern and catastrophe,” said Cynthia Poindexter, who worked for the organization during its first six years. “It grew rapidly out of necessity, forging

its way in the midst of public disdain, systemic neglect, and private terrors.”

Documenting the early history of the organization, Poindexter called grassroots groups such as PALSS “beacons in the darkness of neglect.”

In the beginning, PALSS was powered by a small, unfunded army of trained volunteers. The work was daunting and the magnitude of need overwhelming. They didn’t foresee the scope of the problem.

“Perhaps it’s a good thing we didn’t know what lay ahead, for we may have felt like the task was too monumental to take on,” Harriet said. “We had no blueprint on how to proceed, but we knew the need was there. We all had the same concern: if we don’t take care of our own, who will?”

PALSS held its first volunteer training in the fall of 1985. By then, an estimated 10,000 patients were diagnosed with AIDS in the United States. Untold numbers of others were infected and didn’t know it.

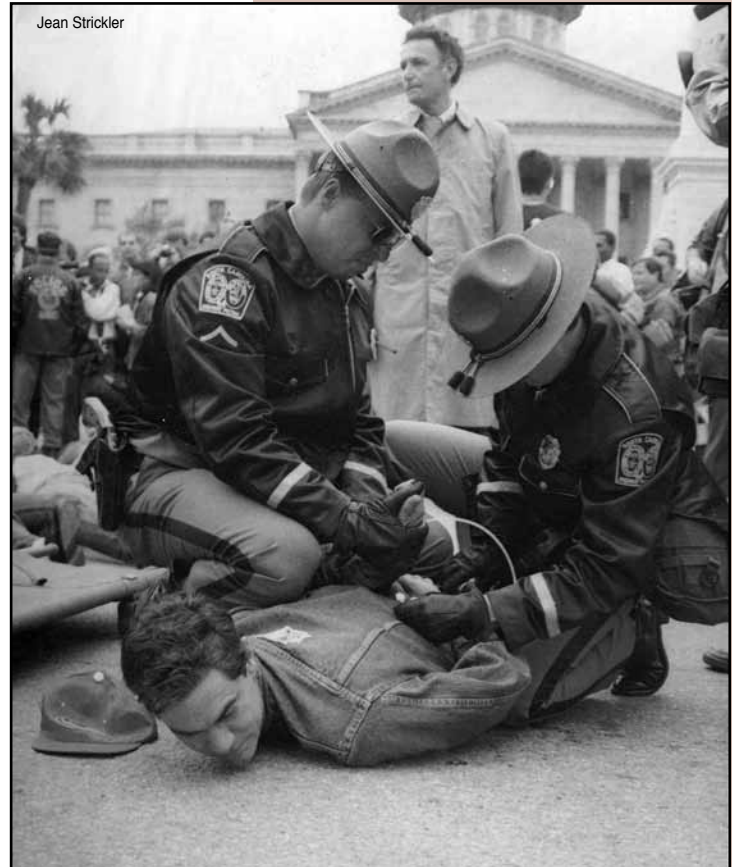
Bill Edens, a Columbia bar owner, was recruited as PALSS’ director, bringing his political savvy and boundless energy to the fledgling organization. Newly diagnosed with HIV, he was driven by

an urgency that propelled PALSS through uncharted territory those first turbulent years.

For many months Edens worked without pay from his apartment, filing client reports in a milk crate. While doing the practical social work of connecting patients with services, he was also writing speeches and issuing warnings.

“The things we said came true,” he told *POINT* newspaper in 1991. “We said people are going to die in the streets, and they did. We said children are going to be abandoned, and they were. We warned that it was going to become an issue for heterosexuals, and it did.”

PALSS struggled financially, surviving the leanest days thanks in large part to a



***SLED Chief Robert Stewart oversees arrests of 41 ACT UP protesters at a “die-in” in front of the State House in Columbia on April 20, 1989. Activists were challenging a proposed bill mandating the quarantine of people with HIV. In one of the first direct-action demonstrations outside of a major city, protesters fell in the street at the intersection of Main and Gervais, blocking traffic. The bill failed to pass.***

\$25,000 grant that Sen. John Courson helped secure from a reluctant and ill-informed legislature. “He knew we were doing good work and didn’t have any money,” Harriet said. “He wanted to do the right thing and was trying to quell fears.

“The attitude of some legislators was that gay people are dispensable, that they’re degenerates,” she said. “Courson’s door was always open, as was Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter’s and the Black Caucus’. They’ve been the ones to help us.”

Courson was good friends with the Edens family, heavy hitters in South Carolina



*South Carolina activists joined thousands from across the country to display the AIDS quilt on the National Mall in October 1987.*

politics. Bill Edens’ aunt, Martha Edens, was a prominent figure in the GOP beginning in the 1950s. His uncle, J. Drake Edens, Jr., is considered the father of the state party. These family connections helped open lawmakers’ doors that otherwise would have remained closed.

PALSS never had enough money to meet the escalating need for services. The organization relied on an underpaid staff, a talented board, and a dedicated network of volunteers who were required to complete two days of intense training to learn the skills they would need to take care of their clients—and each other. Early on, PALSS adopted a team approach to support caregivers in an effort to head off burnout.

Some volunteers worked the crisis hotline, and others were assigned to serve as “buddies” to people with HIV. They did a bit of everything: bought food; cleaned apartments; provided transportation; organized excursions. Just as important, they offered companionship to help alleviate loneliness and fear.

Susan Fulmer recalled those early days as bittersweet. “There was a commitment that was tangible. It was real. It was spiritual.”

The work was intense and emotionally crushing. “It seemed we were going to a funeral a week,” Harriet said.

Poindexter made a habit of checking the obituaries first thing every morning, “looking for but hoping not to see names I knew.

“Death was what we dreaded, but what was also foremost on our minds,” she said. “It was commonplace, but we never became accustomed to it. The shock, sadness and pain did not lessen as the numbers of dead rose. If anything, grief was cumulative and grew heavier over the years.”

“It was a time when we checked in with each other, almost like taking roll,” Tony Snell Rodriguez said. “We were each other’s family, caretakers. We rallied for each other and for the promise that future generations would not have to suffer such devastation.”

The suffering seemed especially cruel when visited upon the young. Among PALSS’ clients was an 8-year-old boy with nowhere to go. His mother had died, his father was in prison, and his grandmother had put him out.

PALSS staff and volunteers rallied to the boy’s aid. The court granted Edens an



emergency right to foster him, the state's first placement of a child with a gay man.

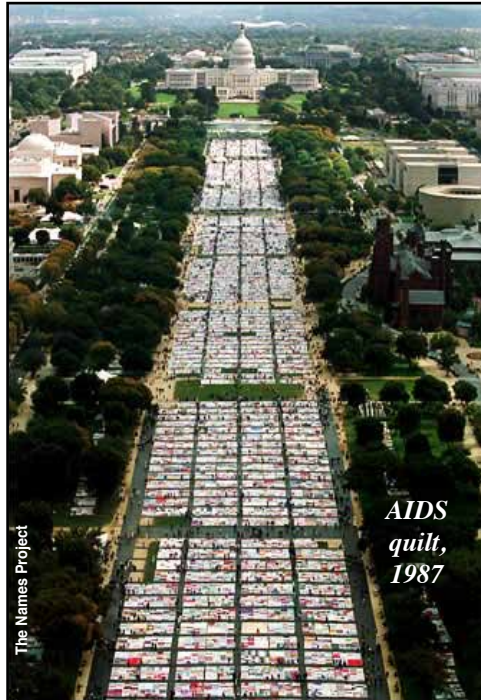
"Brett loved Bill dearly, even called him Daddy," Harriet said, her eyes tearing at the memory 30 years on. "He was just the sweetest little kid. Jennifer and I went to see him at the end, when he was dying. He was so sick and frail he couldn't be touched, but Jennifer would climb into his bed just to be with him. It was tragic."

PALSS workers not only did the daily, dirty work of caring for people with AIDS, they often were left to make final arrangements after their clients died.

One of them was Shirley, a celebrated female impersonator in Columbia who died of AIDS in 1986. Her family, who only knew her as male, lived in Georgia and had asked PALSS to take care of the burial, as they were unable to cover expenses.

True to form, PALSS staff and allies rose to the occasion, raising \$2,000 to pay for the funeral, and tending to the details of the service.

"It was a community effort to bury Shirley," Harriet said. "I remember my sister and I picking out her outfit. She had said she wanted something pink and fluffy. Volunteers did her hair and



make-up. Then the family, who wasn't supposed to come, arrived to see this person in a negligee they didn't know anything about. Well, all heck broke loose."

While those years were marked by relentless loss, they also offered profound reward.

"While HIV/AIDS was a devastating plague, it sowed the seeds of activism in

the Midlands and across South Carolina," writes Sheila Morris in the preface to her new book *Committed to Home: Chronicles of the Queer Movement from a Southern Perspective, 1984–2014*.

"Thoughtful people who felt the pain of grief and loss for loved ones became committed to helping others who were sick and unable to care for themselves—often those whose families and friends deserted them when they needed them most because of the stigma associated with their being homosexual.

"Closets were forced open by the sickness, and fence-sitters gradually found their courage and began to act. Small groups of committed citizens of South Carolina began to organize."

In 1986, *The Washington Post* ran a story on AIDS buddies. It quoted, anonymously, a man who said, "You have to look at it historically to retain your sanity. I have never seen or heard of a community of people coming forward in great numbers to literally take care of their own the way gay people have.

"Someday people will say, 'Look at what happened in the United States—one of the most incredible movements rising up for all the right reasons.' When it spreads—and it will—and the straight



*Organizers of the first Pride rally were hoping at least 100 would join their march down Main Street. To their surprise, a joyous crowd of 2,000 showed up. "We had not planned for people to be on the steps," Harriet said. "But they just ran up those steps to that State House where legislators passed laws against them. They took those steps as a way to say 'We're not going to take this any more!'"*

people start biting the dust, suffering this way, they will say, ‘We underestimated you. We didn’t know what real men you were.’”

## “Silent No More”

The fight for gay equality hasn’t all been heartbreak; there have been moments of transcendence, too. One came on a brilliant Carolina morning in 1990 when Harriet led a crowd down Main Street in the state’s first gay Pride parade.

The day dawned hot and muggy, with a forecast of thunderstorms. A nervous energy buzzed in the air as people gathered at the parade site. The march organizers were prepared for confrontation, had even trained for it, as had the police, who were stationed on rooftops and along the parade route. As it turned out, only a few protesters showed up, and the violence everyone feared never materialized.

“I remember being fearful of stepping out into the streets,” Greg said. “It was terrifying.” The night before, he’d taken a call from his mother, who was anxious and



*Jim Blanton was the first speaker at the first Pride, on June 23, 1990.*



my trembling hand,” Harriet wrote in an essay for Rainbow Radio. “What a feeling of empowerment came over us.

We were part of history! What an emotional time. We were so caught up in the moment that neither of us was aware that tears were streaming down our faces.”

March organizer Bert Easter remembers scanning the rooftops for a possible sniper. “Everyone had friends who said there was going to be trouble,” he said. “The police were turned out in riot gear. Looking back on it, everyone who walked out onto Main Street that day was very brave. But there wasn’t much protest. I think they were in disbelief that gay people would be marching.

“just needed to hear his voice.” They agreed that if they heard gunshots during the parade they would fall on the street and cover their heads.

A whistle signaled the marchers to begin walking. “I took my son’s

trembling hand in

# DEMANDS

- ▼ **WE DEMAND** that those civil rights relating to equal opportunity, employment and housing be amended to include sexual orientation.
- ▼ **WE DEMAND** enactment of legislation to provide legal recognition of domestic partnerships between consenting same sex adults.
- ▼ **WE DEMAND** that the South Carolina law enforcement agencies maintain hate crime statistics, including those related to sexual orientation, and to report those annually to the state legislature.
- ▼ **WE DEMAND** that the Comprehensive Health Education Act be amended to permit the inclusion of information on homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle rather than solely in the context of disease prevention.
- ▼ **WE DEMAND** that the right of gay men and lesbians to be foster and/or adoptive parents be protected.
- ▼ **WE DEMAND** anonymous HIV counseling and testing.
- ▼ **WE DEMAND** the expansion of HIV prevention education for the gay community.
- ▼ **WE DEMAND** that gay and lesbians have equal opportunity to serve in the armed forces.
- ▼ **WE DEMAND** the repeal of the existing buggery/sodomy law in the South Carolina Code of Laws, Sect. 16-15-120, as they relate to consenting adults.

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*List compiled by the Gay and Lesbian Pride Movement, presented at the first Pride.*

“It was Harriet who had the vision, who said, ‘We can do this!’ She was the one who led us down Main Street that first time,” Easter said.

The parade committee inflated 1,000 pink balloons printed with a logo Greg designed—a triangle (to acknowledge homosexuals who were forced to wear pink triangles in Nazi concentration camps) set against a stone pattern (to remember the Stonewall protests that

started the American Pride movement in 1969). There weren’t nearly enough balloons to go around.

The day was a collective coming out, a mass public declaration. “It was a courageous group of people raising their banners high and voices loud, arm in arm, brothers and sisters,” Snell Rodriguez said. “We, if only for one day, occupied what was rightly ours, as upstanding, tax-paying, equal citizens.

remark made by Jim Blanton, who had grown tired of the gay movement being in the closet. Harriet ran into him at a diner the morning of the annual Pride picnic, an event closed to the general public and press. She asked whether she’d see him later that day at Dreher Park.

Blanton remembers saying, “That’s not gay pride; that’s gay shame.” He added, “If you march down Main Street, I’ll be glad to join you.”



*James Sears at Pride in 1991, the year he published Growing Up Gay in the South. A former professor at the University of South Carolina, he has written widely on the LGBT movement. In Lonely Hunters, An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948–1968, he writes: “Documenting, writing, and reading narratives of our communities provide lesbians and gay men with a collection of sacred, communal stories that for too long have been lost or devalued in the larger canon of heterosexist history—presented to us as fact.”*

“Coming out from the shadows, we were no longer going to be shunned by lawmakers and our fellow South Carolinians. This was our day to shine. It was truly a sea of pink, rainbow flags, festive balloons, and one sign that summed it all up: Gay Proud and Silent No More.”

The march was nearly a year in the making. It started with an offhand

“At the time,” Harriet said, “there was work being done for LGBT rights, but for the most part people were afraid to be activists because of their jobs. The way they celebrated Pride was to have a picnic somewhere or a party at someone’s house. There was too much fear about being open.”

Accepting Blanton’s challenge, she decided to float the idea of organizing a march. After the picnic had stretched into the afternoon, when the party-goers were “feeling no pain,” as she put it, Harriet pulled out her clipboard and began circulating the crowd, asking whether there was any interest in having a parade the next year.

The response was enthusiastic. “Oh, yes! Put my name down,” they told her. “Little did they know that in short order I would

be calling them to talk about getting a group together to organize a Pride march,” she said.

The group she assembled met the Sunday after Hurricane Hugo hit. “It was supposed to be a potluck, but nobody had any power,” she said. “I couldn’t believe the number of people who came. South Carolina was devastated, but people drove all the way from Charleston. I’ve often said that Hugo blew the closet doors off South Carolina.”

That meeting would be the first of many. “When we began the arduous 10 months of planning, we honestly felt we would be a success if 100 people showed up,” Blanton said. “There was understandably a great deal of resistance from the LGBT community. Many felt we should just let well enough alone.”

They named the new organization the South Carolina Gay and Lesbian Pride Movement, which later became SC Pride.

“That first year, all correspondence used the acronym GLPM, since many people didn’t want to receive mail with the words ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ on an envelope,” Blanton said.

“We’ve been made to feel we have to be invisible,” he told a reporter before the rally. “Now, some of us realize that situation is not going to change unless we become visible.” A GLPM press release claimed 10 percent of South Carolina’s population is gay—nearly 347,000 men and women—8,000 more than the state’s largest county of Greenville.

“We spent almost every weekend in one gay bar or another holding fundraisers

## SHESAID

“I feel like my son being gay opened up a whole new world to me—a wonderful community of good people who are fun, artistic, talented, and intelligent. It has enriched my life.”

“I have been working with people with HIV/AIDS since 1985. I have made many friends who are infected with this disease, and I have lost many friends to this disease. They have put their trust in me when they felt that they could trust few others. They have allowed me to share a very private part of their lives, and have taught me a lot about living. Helping people with AIDS has been the most rewarding work I have ever done. No amount of financial compensation could ever equal what I have gained from them.”





*The Upstate was deeply divided when Greenville County Council passed an anti-gay resolution in 1996.*

and trying to drum up enthusiasm for the march,” Blanton said. “I was so burned out that I’ve never gone to a gay bar since.”

Easter remembers heated debate about who should march in the first parade. What should their public face look like, and who got to decide? These were tough questions from a community not used to the scrutiny of the press or public. And they didn’t always agree on strategy and tactics.

“Harriet always had an inclusive mind set,” Easter said, “so when people were arguing whether drag queens should be in the first Pride march, she said, ‘Of course they should be. Of course leather people

should march. Of course transgendered people should march.’”

Mandy Carter, who had helped organize North Carolina’s first Pride festival two years earlier, was invited to Columbia to offer lessons learned in Durham. She stayed in Harriet’s home when she came to town, and over the months they became good friends.

Carter spoke at Columbia’s first Pride, and remembers being overwhelmed and overjoyed. “When we got up on the stage and looked out at the crowd—it was a moment. I get chills thinking about how pivotal and critical that was. I was struck by the allies who were not gay, straight people saying ‘We stand in solidarity with you.’”

Blanton said two memories of the day left deep impressions. “The first was the palpable joy we were all feeling as we proclaimed our equality,” he said. “This culminated in the unplanned storming of the State House steps by the jubilant marchers.

“The second was more intimate. Because the City of Columbia outlawed the

wearing of masks, the parade committee provided clown makeup to disguise those who wanted to march with us *incognito*. Before the march began, I spotted an acquaintance who had opted for the clown disguise. When I hugged him, he was so terrified he was trembling.

“I saw him later in the afternoon at the rally. His face—which was now cleansed of make-up—was radiant. He was transformed.”

Harriet said, “Sleepy little Columbia didn’t think it had any gay people until it saw them in the streets.” She credits the march with the city passing a non-discrimination employment policy. “It started the conversation.”

Dr. Ed Madden, director of USC’s Women and Gender Studies program, said Harriet set the stage for what would become an annual celebration. “She was a pivot, walking around with that clipboard at a picnic and getting people to sign up. That changed how gay and lesbian people existed in this state. There were people who were out, but what she did was like a tipping point, a fulcrum, a challenge to think beyond the picnic, the private party.”

Pride has been held every year except in 2001 and 2002, when GLPM was in

transition. Although traditionally held in Columbia, Pride moved to Greenville in 1997, and the next year to Myrtle Beach.

The circumstances that prompted those moves weren't pretty.

## Greenville Stages Morality Play

Greenville County, home to the state's highest concentration of evangelical Christians, passed a resolution in 1996 condemning homosexuality, calling it "incompatible with community standards."

The declaration was deemed contrary to the spirit of the Olympics, and cost the county the Olympic torch, which was re-routed through the county in a van on its

way to Atlanta. The Tour DuPont bicycle race and Special Olympics events were also moved in protest.

The resolution threw the county into bitter debate. Roger Bell spoke at a raucous Council meeting during the heat of the controversy. "The Upstate is as homophobic today as it was racist 40 years ago," he said. "Now, laws and resolutions are being passed to legally make us second-class citizens. We cannot and will not be silent."

In a move of solidarity with their allies in the Upstate, GLPM decided to move the Pride parade to Greenville in 1997.

A solicitation letter to supporters read: Thousands of courageous citizens will gather in downtown Greenville to celebrate the cause of individual liberty and equality under the law. By marching for diversity, tolerance and inclusion, we are not soliciting special rights for any group. Rather, we are demonstrating our commitment to common rights for all.



*Pride moves to Greenville in 1997.*

"To think of people turning away from dying people, for your minister to refuse to bury you, for all the people that normally help to turn away. How can that be?"

"I feel very fortunate to live in Richland County. We've had a lot of support from people in local government. I don't think Mayor Bob Coble had been in office a year when he stuck his neck out for us. Diversity creates a stronger city."

"I've helped a lot of parents and family members come to terms with accepting their gay children. I accepted my own son readily, but I was concerned. I felt this huge pit of anxiety and fear."



**I**n Betty DeGeneres' book *Love, Ellen: A Mother/Daughter Journey*, she recounts going to Pride in Myrtle Beach in 1998, the year the city's elders very publicly

denounced the event.

**"It was estimated that 8,000 men and women attended. I met a number of supportive family members sharing in the celebration, lending moral support to the concept that gay men and women have every right to come together, feel comfortable and celebrate who they are.**

**"One of the first people I met was Harriet Hancock, the matriarch of what has to be one of the first families of the South Carolina gay community.**

**"I felt a close kinship with her. She too had gone back to college in her forties. I also met her son, Greg, his sister who was there helping out; and the sister's five-year-old son Tommy, who wore a t-shirt saying 'I Love My Gay Uncle.'**

**Talk about family values! Greg and Tommy led the Pledge of Allegiance to start the program."** ☉

Harriet Hancock

"Our goal is neither to frighten nor provoke. It is simply to stand firm against attacks on our civil rights and civil liberties; to present an accurate portrayal of ourselves to the community and media in order to dispel myths about homosexuals; and to continue our opposition to the anti-gay resolution passed by the Greenville County Council."

News of the march generated support as well as a fierce backlash. When gay-friendly businesses put stickers in their windows signalling their support for Pride, their locks were glued shut.

A group calling itself Citizens for Traditional Family Values blanketed Greenville with flyers condemning the march and warning people to stay away or risk getting AIDS. "Homosexuals are going to be using the toilets, they are going to be using the parks, they are going to be using the restaurants," warned Rev. Stan Craig, pastor of Choice Hills Baptist Church, who urged con-

servatives to attend the Traditional Family Values Rally the following weekend, an event his group organized in response to the "gay assault on Greenville."

That effort filled Greenville's Memorial Stadium, which seats 7,000. Hundreds more stood outside, peering through the chain link fence.

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis was among the speakers. He expressed outrage that gays "are marching in our streets" and

vowed to fight "the homosexual agenda." He said he would not accept the moral decay creeping South. "We have a real threat on our hands. Some things are right and some things are wrong, and we're going to say it." He got a standing ovation.

Inglis was followed by Gov. David Beasley, who said, "This isn't a rally; this is a revival." He looked at the stormy sky and said, "These raindrops are really angels' teardrops in thanks for your coming out and standing strong."



*Greg Hancock and his nephew Tommy Gordon onstage at Myrtle Beach Pride in 1998.*



“We must draw a moral line in the sand that we will not cross. You people give us the strength to draw that line.” The governor got a standing ovation, too.

A year later, the drama would move to Myrtle Beach.

## Myrtle Beach Daze

The dust-up in Greenville over the Olympic torch attracted national attention. So South Carolina was on the media radar screen when GLPM announced that Pride would be moving to Myrtle Beach to challenge efforts by the city’s power elite to exclude the LGBT community.

*The New York Times* ran a front-page story headlined: Gay Rights Movement Meets Big Resistance in S. Carolina. Reporter Kevin Sack wrote, “Gay rights leaders, political scientists and government officials agree that a distinct confluence of factors has contributed to the rawness of gay rights conflicts here: the pervasiveness of fundamentalist Christianity, which interprets scriptural

warnings against homosexuality as God-given truth; the ties between religious conservatives and the state’s surging Republican Party; the increasing activism of the state’s gay community; the South’s history of institutionalized bigotry, and the state’s resistance to cultural change, racial and otherwise.”

Sack quoted Harriet, who said, “There may be discrimination against gays and lesbians everywhere, but here the gay-baiting is so open. It used to be race-baiting. Now it’s gay-baiting.” Snell Rodriguez added that gays in South Carolina were “the scapegoat *du jour*.”

The four-day festival in Myrtle Beach drew bigger crowds and more media attention than ever before. The bump in numbers was a

public rebuke of Mayor Mark McBride, who warned event organizers that his city did not welcome “gay garbage,” and Burroughs and Chapin, the Grand Strand’s biggest landlord and developer, which issued a memo to its tenants threatening “repercussions” if they supported the festival.



“Visibility is the key to changing hearts and minds. If you’re visible, and people can see you and know you for the kind of person you are, then they’re much less likely to discriminate against you.”

“For years, it was okay to tell jokes about African Americans. With gays and lesbians, it’s still OK to tell horrible jokes about them. Hopefully, that will go by the wayside, too.”

“I know people risk a lot—their jobs, homes, families—but I wish everyone could come out.”

“I never thought I’d see marriage equality—not in my lifetime. Not in my son’s lifetime. I think I’ll forever be in shock about how quickly it happened.”

The strong-arm tactics failed. City Council unanimously opposed the mayor, and allowed several downtown streets to be closed for the festival.

B&C, used to getting its way, was so furious it changed its official slogan from “Boldly Shaping the Future with



*A couple at Pride 1999 wearing matching shirts that read: “Experience the Radically Inclusive Love of Christ!”*

Pride” to “Family Values Since 1895.” A company spokesperson explained, “Too many of those other people are using the word ‘pride.’”

In an ad that ran in local newspapers, B&C said: “As a private company, we have not, nor do we intend to be forced or intimidated into supporting organized activities that we believe endanger the historic values of our nation and the cornerstone truths on which they are based.”

B&C pressured the Hard Rock Cafe to withdraw its participation in the festival, and refused to allow the Village People to perform at the venue. “Traditional family values don’t support their lifestyle and their sexual activities,” McBride told *The Sun News*. “I think they’re going to come and propose their lifestyle and what it means to be gay and lesbian. Our community doesn’t want it. People don’t come here for those activities.”

McBride was wrong. People came, some 8,000 strong. The controversy helped Pride organizers attract big-name speakers, including U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich’s sister Candice Gingrich, and comedian Ellen DeGeneres’ mother, Betty DeGeneres.

## Losing Faith

It is impossible to separate religion from the struggle for gay equality, especially in the South, where church and state have held a long political alliance with very real social consequences.

South Carolina ties with Arkansas as the 5th most religious state in the nation, with 70 percent of adults describing themselves as “highly religious,” according to the Pew Research Center. Nearly three-fourths of adults in the Palmetto State say they believe in God with “absolute certainty,” and nearly half attend weekly worship services.

Morris profiled 21 gay leaders in her new book. “What’s interesting,” she said, “is that so many of them came from strongly conservative backgrounds. The church has disappointed them, hurt them, ostracized them. Terrible things happened to people within the church setting.”

When Morris was growing up, being gay was not just considered a sin, but a pathology. “The thought back then was that if you are a homosexual you are mentally ill, and the law was that you could be imprisoned for it,” she said. “So all those messages were coming at me as a young person—and not just me, but so many others.”

While there are a number of welcoming churches now in South Carolina, for some it is too little too late. "Many of them have totally walked away," Harriet said. "They may never come back because of the disappointment they've had, the ostracism. There's a strong distrust there. It's the same with police; there is a lack of trust."

Morris, a sixth-generation Southern Baptist, met her first long-term girlfriend while in seminary in Texas. In the early 1980s, she followed her partner to South Carolina. She worked as a minister of music, and sang in the choir at several Columbia churches. The relationship with the woman didn't last. Nor did her relationship with the church.

It was a bitter parting of ways. Over the years that Morris worked in a prominent Baptist church, she became good friends with the pianist. "He was gifted," she said. "His playing was spiritual for me." One Christmas, after the church's annual musical program, the pianist was fired because it had come to the staff's attention that he was gay.

# Indigo Girls set alternative concert

COLUMBIA (AP) — The Indigo Girls, whose free concert at a suburban high school was canceled, will play South Carolina's capital next Thursday after all.

The Grammy-winning group was to sing and answer students' questions at Irmo High School, but parents' complaints about the lesbian duo led Principal Gerald Witt to cancel the performance.

Instead, Emily Sailers and Amy Ray will play the Township Auditorium, where they've rocked before.

Tickets, which go on sale today, are \$15 for the public, with 1,000 available. High schoolers with a student I.D. can pick up free passes at the box office on first-come, first-served basis; 2,000 seats are reserved for students.

"If the parents don't want the kids to come, then they shouldn't let them come. But there's no reason for them not to play here," said Dana Tishgarten, an Irmo High student.

The Indigo Girls played at Furman University in the Upstate on Thursday.

"It hurts my feelings, but I understand prejudice and where hate comes from," Sailers said from the Greenville campus. "I know that it's in the world, and it's not just directed towards gay people, but it's directed towards lots of groups of people."

The Indigo Girls' manager, Russell Carter, had said he was working with Hootie and the Blowfish manager, Rusty Harmon, to stage a Columbia show. Members of Hootie attended the University of South Carolina and are friends with Ray and Sailers.

The canceled concert stirred passions among Irmo students, who talked of a walkout next Thursday, and among administrators.

Local school board Chairman David Eckstrom said it appeared to him the Indigo Girls were "promoting an agenda." Eckstrom, a Republican running for state education superintendent, cited an article in an Atlanta gay newspaper discussing their sexuality.

Ray was born in Decatur, Ga. Sailers was born in New Haven, Conn., but moved to Georgia with her family when she was young.

"These women are artists and (were) going to share their gift," Harriet Hancock of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) said from Myrtle Beach, the site of today's gay

pride festival. "Now, they can't come because they're lesbians? This is first-class discrimination."

“

It hurts my feelings, but I understand prejudice and where hate comes from.

Emily Sailers  
Singer

”

The Item, May 1998.

# THEY SAID

“I love Harriet. She is the original warrior woman.”

Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter

“We call her, with great affection and respect, the ‘Mother of Pride,’ and indeed, she is a surrogate mother to many of us who have lost our families and friends because of who we are.”

Ed Madden

“Harriet is a heroine, in my opinion. I admire her for her passion for what she believes in.”

Sen. John Courson

“Fierce and compassionate, Harriet embodies what most people aspire to be. She’s a warrior, rising to the challenge, with courage and conviction, upholding everything that is right and leading the charge against everything that is wrong.”

Tony Snell Rodriguez

Harriet Hancock

They abruptly severed ties and banned him from the property. Unable to retrieve his belongings, he contacted Harriet for legal help. She advised him that she couldn’t file a case for wrongful termination, given South Carolina’s “right to work” laws that grant employers nearly unlimited freedom to fire at will. But she could get his property back.

After months of stonewalling, Harriet threatened legal action, and the church staff finally relented. “They dumped his stuff out on his lawn without even telling him they were going to do it,” Morris said. It was a painful turning point for her, and she left the church that had been so central to her life.

“I grew up in a little town in a very poor county,” Morris said. “My parents were in church every Sunday, but the message I got from that church was that I was going to Hell.”

It was a heavy burden for a small child. “I knew when I was about 5 years old that I was different,” she said. “I didn’t have a name for it, but I knew. I lived a double life for the next 30 years.”

When Harriet was a child, she attended Kilbourne Baptist Church in Columbia, which her father cofounded. After she married, she and her new husband adopted a church near their Rosewood home. It was not a good fit. And after



Rev. Tom Summers (wearing clerical collar and holding the red banner) has worked with Harriet since the early days of the AIDS epidemic.

being singled out for humiliation by a fire-and-brimstone visiting pastor, she ran out mid-sermon, vowing never to return.

Harriet now considers herself agnostic. “That’s where I land right now. Surely there is something out there bigger than us, but whatever it is, I’m happy for it to just be a mystery.”

She attends Community Church of the Midlands, which she helped establish with the Rev. Dr. John Whatley in 2001. “He had moved back to Columbia to take care of aging parents,” Harriet said. “He was looking for a church and couldn’t find one, and I was looking for a church and couldn’t find one. They all just seemed to be very mean-spirited.”

The Rev. Thomas Summers has worked alongside Harriet for decades. A retired Methodist minister, Summers served as a hospital chaplain and director of clinical pastoral education with the S.C. Dept. of Mental Health for 41 years.

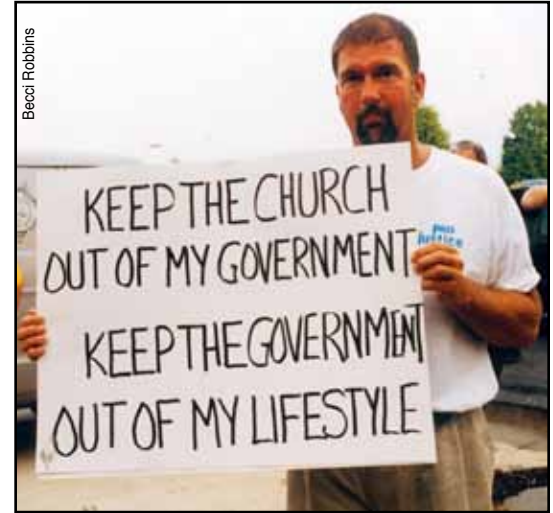
During the early days of the epidemic, Summers accepted a request to preside over a funeral for a man who had died of AIDS, and whose family and church had cast him out. The cruelty shocked and saddened him. “As a result of such a wrenching experience, there became resurrected within me questions,” he said.

“These questions have stayed with me and in my continuing ministry with the LGBT community. It is sadly my estimation that the church has yet to offer its fuller riches of blessing, understanding, and support to our LGBT brothers and sisters.”

Summers cites statistics that show gay teens are four times more likely to die by suicide than their peers. Bullying plays a part, he said, but so does theology “play a critical role in cultivating a devastating and crushing guilt.”

The refusal of some denominations to bless same-gender couples troubles him deeply. “In my opinion,” Rev. Summers said, “this neglect of the preciousness of human bonds—gay or straight—is perhaps one of the greatest incompatibilities and violations of the Biblical principles of equality, fairness, love, and justice.”

He is not alone in his disappointment. Blanton said his spiritual life “was a series of ups and downs. Ultimately, in my mid-40s, my anger over the hatred and homophobia in the church won the day. While I wish the church would come around for those who still care—like my partner—I personally no longer care.”



*Greenville protester, 1996*

Diane Carr, a longtime PALSS volunteer, shared her frustration at the church’s inaction in the face of AIDS in a 1991 story. “I think the church places limits,” she said. “Yes, I’ll love my neighbor—provided he’s white, and middle-class, and straight, and sober, and clean. There are all these conditions.”

She watched several people die in her years volunteering as an AIDS buddy. Her gift to them was her presence. “If I’ve learned anything from PALSS, it’s the importance of little things, putting your arms around someone and saying ‘I love you.’”

“I see her as a relentless, kind warrior who doesn’t waver when it comes to leaving no stones unturned to deal with this issue of LGBTQ liberation. She has humor, she has guts, she has anger, and all those things combined I think make one powerful son of a gun. She is something else.”

Rev. Tom Summers

“Harriet set the plans in motion that empowered us to change lives for the better.”

Jim Blanton

“When other people got burned out, when other people got tired of the drama, she’s been consistent, and has continued to fight and hang in there. That’s got to be worth something in everyone’s book.”

Bert Easter

## S.C. Gay Couples Say “I Do”

On Nov. 19, 2014, the first marriage license was issued to a same-gender couple in South Carolina following a Fourth Circuit ruling that found Virginia’s ban on same-sex marriage unconstitutional.

Malissa Burnette litigated the *Condon v. Haley* case, representing Charleston County Council member Colleen Condon, who filed suit in federal district court seeking the right to marry in October 2014.

Condon and Nichols Bleckley were the first couple to pick up their license. That simple bit of bureaucracy was a long time coming and the cause of great celebration across South Carolina among gay activists and allies who had worked so long for marriage equality in a state that had worked just as hard to prevent it.

In 1996, the S.C. House, in an 82–0 vote, passed a statute defining marriage as a contract between one man and one woman. The Senate passed the bill, and

Gov. David Beasley signed it into law. The issue was still part of the national conversation when, in March 2005, South Carolina lawmakers approved a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage and any “lawful domestic union.” The following November, voters overwhelmingly approved it.



*Ed Madden (left) and Bert Easter after their Charleston wedding in 2005—a ceremony not legally recognized.*

Unwittingly, they inspired organized opposition. “An unintended consequence of the anti-gay amendment was that it galvanized the LGBT activists, strengthening their networks and organizing clout, and political maturity,” Madden wrote in a paper on the Fairness for All Families Campaign. “So 2005 was a watershed year, a tipping point for GLBT organizing in this state. By 2006,

the campaign was in full swing. For that year, we worked to maintain a campaign that would be movement building, not just focused on the vote.

“The campaign was crafted by the SC Equality Coalition, the state’s primary LGBT political group, founded in 2002. It was supported by allies such as the SC Progressive Network, a coalition of human rights activists from across the state.”

The most optimistic among them never dreamed they would see marriage equality realized anytime soon, and were shocked when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states, with Justice Anthony Kennedy writing, “They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right.”

The news stunned Harriet. “I was overjoyed, relieved, and very moved,” she told a reporter. “All I could do was just cry. It’s like relief. Finally! The Supreme Court of the United States has spoken. This is it. There is no further place to go.



Mandy Carter

We’re going to enjoy this, and then we’re going to move on to end discrimination of jobs, housing, and public accommodations. That’s the next big step. We cannot let up.”

For Snell Rodriguez, gaining marriage equality was a monumental achievement.

“I do’ are the two

most important words in my life and for lots of couples across this land.” he said. “Even for those without partners, the right to be able to say these words creates standing, dignity, and hope—and a path for us to attain whole justice and fairness.”

Weddings were not a universal priority in the gay community. “Marriage equality was never my issue,” Blanton said. “When the first GLPM steering committee formulated our list of demands, marriage was so inconceivable, it didn’t even make the list.

“Early on, I had trouble understanding why we would want to emulate heterosexual marriage,” he said, “but, of course, my understanding of the importance of marriage equality evolved.

“I think it’s amazing that it happened so relatively quickly, and I’m thrilled it’s the law of the land. Ed and I have not yet chosen to marry, but it sure is nice to have that option.”



*On Oct. 8, 2014, LGBT activists and allies from across South Carolina celebrated at the State House after the historic court decisions paving the way for marriage equality in South Carolina. After a rally, they delivered 5,000 petitions to the attorney general’s office. Ignoring the writing on the legal wall, the governor and the AG vowed to continue using taxpayer money to fight in court. The next day, the S.C. Supreme Court blocked the marriage license applications gay couples had filed the day before.*

“Ms. Harriet’s leadership is legendary in the state of South Carolina. She was our LGBT pioneer before a movement even existed, and she has never quit.”

Rev. Andy Sidden

“When I think about what she’s done in South Carolina—taking up the banner of gay pride in a state like this at a time like that—going to law school so she could advocate for her cause. Just think about it!”

Karen Hancock Klocko

“Through these last 30 years, Harriet has been there for us. I’ve always admired her, always respected her. You can’t say something better about a person than they showed up. Harriet showed up—big time.”

Sheila Morris

“Harriet is an amazing role model. She’s gutsy. She’s the spark that started it all.”

Mandy Carter

## Legacy of Love

Of all the work she’s done, Harriet said she is most proud of the community-owned LGBT center she envisioned and then opened in 1993. It operated for a year in a run-down Columbia neighborhood until it was moved into a converted house on Woodrow Street, which they renovated using the sweat and skills of volunteers.

Keeping the center open over the years with no paid staff has been a challenge, and the board is in the process of hiring someone for the first time. “It’s a struggle

having a center operated entirely on volunteers,” Harriet said. “We have so much on our plates, so many groups meeting there, I think it’s remarkable we’ve done so well.”

Harriet’s daughter Jennifer Tague considers the center her second home. “I was here when they bought the house,” she said. “I was here when they renovated the building. I was here when they dedicated the house. It was a long process. It’s been great.”

The building was renamed the Harriet Hancock Center in 2005. Jennifer said the dedication was “a night to remember. It was a lot of fun, a lot of tears, a lot of hugging. Mom was so proud to have the Center named after her for all the hard work that she’s done.”

Harriet said people have told her the center saved their life. “It’s a safe haven for people who don’t have anywhere to go,” she said. “We have done so much here, it’s an accomplishment.”

Harriet keeps a busy schedule, ignoring the pleas of friends and family who wish she would slow down and take some time for herself for a change. “Sometimes I tell her she needs to rein it in a little, dial



*Columbia Mayor Bob Coble awards Harriet the Key to the City in 2008.*



it down a notch,” Greg Hancock said. “She’ll be frantic, having this going on and that going on, but she just keeps going strong. This work has given her life purpose and meaning. I only hope I’m that connected and that involved in life when I’m her age.”

Daughter Karen Hancock Klocko said, “I have never seen her tire of this work. There have been times when she’s been discouraged, but I’ve never heard her say she’s burned out.”

Carter spent time with Harriet at the 2016 Creating Change conference in Chicago, four days of meetings and workshops with LGBT activists from across the country. She marvels at Harriet’s energy and commitment. “I remember saying way back when, ‘How do you do it? You’re doing the lawyer thing, the center, all this stuff.’ She told me, ‘You know, Mandy, at some point I’m going to be able to do what I want to do.’ But she’s still just as busy.”

Apparently, Harriet *is* doing what she wants to do. Activism isn’t what she does; it is who she is.

Harriet remains the heart of the Hancock family. Although her children are now scattered across three states, they gather together several times a year. Home, they

all agree, is where their mother is. Greg lives in Atlanta, working as a graphic designer. Jennifer just took a job with SC Equality, “picking up the torch,” she said. Karen is in Maryland raising three daughters, who have been to their share of gay festivals over the years. She said they have each had a “Pride moment,” the experience of “standing in the

middle of the festival and seeing all these people who have struggled to be accepted, and seeing them so excited and happy. To know my mother had something to do with it makes it so personal.”

Harriet also remains at the heart of the LGBT family in South Carolina, much-beloved by the people she has fought for



*Tony and Harriet at 2016  
Creating Change conference*

*Tony Snell Rodriguez has covered a lot of ground with Harriet—literally. He offers this look back.*



**“Picture a four-door Dodge Dynasty with a bumper sporting every justice and Pride sticker ever made, way before these causes were cool, and a backseat overflowing with boxes of banners, t-shirts, and rainbow flags piled so high you couldn’t see out of the back window.**

**It was Harriet’s car in the wind and on the way to another town, equipped with the fundamentals to put out another fire or rally the troops.**

**Needless to say, when I served as president of GLPM (aka SC Pride) we were attached at the hip.**

**When crises arose on the coast, Upstate, or anywhere in between, I’d give Harriet a call, and she’d say, ‘Let’s go! I’ll pick you up in an hour.’**

**Our trips were filled with conversation, excitement, anxiety, strategizing, and sometimes a few tears. I cherished every mile, every moment, and every word. She may not have been able to see out of her back window but, make no mistake, she had a clear vision of where we were heading—and how to get there.”** ☺

“Her work has helped to guarantee that gays, lesbians and their families, too long vilified and dismissed, have a place in South Carolina—an acknowledged place at the table.”

Ed Madden

“The thing I admire most about my mom is her courage to stand and fight. She raised us to love and respect others, and I just hope that I am the kind of mother to my son that she was to me.”

Jennifer Tague

“I’ve been to many legislative meetings with my grandmother. It seems like politicians here are always trying to pass laws against gay people, like the right to marry and the right to adopt children. I hope that by the time I’m grown things will be different, and people will have learned to accept people for who they are.”

Tommy Gordon,  
Harriet’s grandson

and worked with for more than 30 years. She has earned the title Mother of Pride.

Snell Rodriguez said Harriet has taught him the meaning of resiliency. “We’ve been spat upon, cursed, had our lives threatened, and been condemned to hell by politicians and preachers alike,” he said. “It wouldn’t be defined as activism without risk.”

The newest generation of activists—and not just in the LGBT community—would do well to learn from Harriet’s example of steadfast focus and unwavering commitment.

As abolitionist Frederick Douglass said, “Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation are people who want crops without plowing the ground; they want rain without thunder and light-



Activist and author Sheila Morris swaps stories with her friend of 30 years in Harriet’s home.

ning. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will.”

Nobody knows that better than Harriet, who also understands the power of coalitions. “She has brought together straight people and gay people, families and politicians, health care practitioners and disenfranchised populations,” Madden said. “She has built alliances, strengthened nascent communities and helped to create public voices for marginalized people in our state. Her record is one of tireless community-building. She truly represents the changing face of South Carolina.”

That changing face is attracting the state’s sons and daughters back home. Carter, who has spent most of her life in North Carolina, said, “I lived in San Francisco, and I was struck by how many Southerners were there. Now, people are moving back home to the South because change is happening here.”

Harriet has been making change for 30 years. She has opened hearts and minds—and closets. In the process, she has made South Carolina a better place for those who want to live in a state that doesn’t just talk about family values, but practices them. ☉

*In 2011, Harriet was invited to a reception at the White House with leaders from around the country. She was one of just 12 selected to meet privately with President Barack Obama.*



## South Carolina History You Didn't Learn in School

Contrary to popular narrative that says the “gay lifestyle” is a modern construct, the product of a permissive and godless culture, history shows that homosexuality has always been part of the human experience.

Native Americans had a more fluid understanding of sexuality and gender identity than did the colonialists who would occupy their land and impose their own moral prescriptions. Some of the earliest Native artifacts reveal the existence of cross-gender roles.

Native cultures held that androgynous people, feminine males and masculine females, were “two-spirit” people, seen as gifted—visionaries and healers.

But both the Spanish settlers and the English colonialists condemned them as “sodomites.” In 1712, the Carolina’s colonial government adopted English Common Law prohibitions against “buggery,” with the penalty of death.

South Carolina would be the last state, in 1869, to change it from a capital crime. And while the U.S. Supreme Court in 2003 struck down sodomy laws, they remain on the books in South Carolina.

“Unlike other states, which adopted the term of ‘sodomy’ or in later years defined sexual crimes more specifically, South Carolina retained the archaic umbrella term of ‘buggery’ through successive revisions of the criminal code to the present,” Ed Madden writes in *Proud Heritage: People, Issues and Documents of the LGBT Experience* (published in 2014).

Madden, who wrote the chapter on South Carolina, references a letter written in 1810 by Rep. John C. Calhoun to the woman who would become his mother-in-law, expressing shock that their friend Wentworth Boisseau was a homosexual. He writes, “I cannot conceive of how he contracted the odious habit, except while a sailor to the West Indies.”

Madden also documents a sexual relationship between two high-profile South Carolina men, a story relatives fought in court from being revealed.

“In 1826,” Madden writes, “two young South Carolina men who would later become leaders in the Confederacy wrote letters to one another that seem explicit about their sexual relationship.”

Thomas Jefferson Withers, who served in the Confederate States of Congress, wrote fondly to his college chum James H. Hammond about their intimacies.



Library of Congress

“Hammond would later become a major defender of both state’s rights and slavery, serving as the state’s governor and then as a U.S. Senator until his resignation in 1860, when South Carolina seceded from the Union,” Madden writes.

“First published in 1981, these letters provide important documentary evidence of homosexual activity at the time. Further, the publication not only raised important questions about historical evidence and interpretation, but also questions about acceptable

*James H. Hammond served as South Carolina’s governor and U.S. senator. Letters reveal that he had a sexual relationship with a fellow Confederate leader.*

areas of historical inquiry and access to knowledge about our own antecedents.”

The lives of Laura Towne and Ellen Murray raise similar questions of evidence and interpretation, Madden writes. The Pennsylvania abolitionists moved to St. Helena Island in 1862 to found Penn Center, the first school for freed slaves.

Madden writes, “Close companions for more than 40 years, they exemplify... a ‘romantic friendship,’ sometimes called at the time a ‘Boston marriage,’ a model of emotional relationship acceptable for unmarried professional women. While a recent history might refer decorously to their ‘strong affectionate bond,’ others would claim them as ancestors to the current movement.

“Similarly, Laura Bragg, who became the director of the Charleston Museum in 1920, maintained a longtime relationship with her companion, Belle Heyward, cousin of DuBose Heyward, author of *Porgy and Bess*. Like Towne, Bragg was a progressive educator who transformed the educational outreach of the museum and opened its doors to black patrons.”

It is a challenge to document gay history in South Carolina, as moral and religious dictates have largely forced gay life

underground. Until the 1980s, gays and lesbians remained a largely invisible population. There have been exceptions. Perhaps the most notable was South Carolina’s first “out” transsexual; a more colorful character fiction could not invent.

In 1962, British writer Gordon Langley Hall arrived in Charleston by chauffeured limousine with his parrot Marilyn and two pedigreed chihuahuas. With his high-brow European connections (he was born to the aristocrat Marjorie Hall Ticehurst, and his godmother was the British actress Dame Margaret Rutherford), he was soon embraced by the social elite in Charleston. Fun and flamboyant, he could name-drop with the best of them and added to their parties a whiff of aristocracy from the mother country.

That all changed on Sept. 23, 1968, when Gordon Hall woke from surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore and began a new life as Dawn Pepita Langley Hall.

If that weren’t shocking enough, Hall soon announced her engagement to John-Paul Simmons, her black butler, whom she’d been courting in secret for a year. The news was not well-received. A bomb threat forced the couple to move the wedding from a Baptist church to the Hall’s home.



Library of Congress

*We'wha was a revered spiritual leader who served as an emissary of the Zuni in Washington, where he met President Grover Cleveland. We'wha had a husband who was generally recognized as such. Photo circa 1886.*



## Former 'He' to Wed Negro Butler Tonight

Charleston, S. C. (UPI) — British author Gordon Langley Hall, who underwent a surgical sex change, showed up in a mini-skirt Tuesday and applied for a license to marry her Negro butler. They were to be married Wednesday night.

Wearing heavy make-up and eye shadow, Miss Hall — now known as Dawn Pepita Langley Hall — was accompanied by her fiance, John Paul Simmons.

Miss Hall, biographer of Princess Margaret, Jacqueline Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson, listed an age of 31 on the license application. Other sources said the age was about 39. Simmons is 30.

The marriage made international headlines. Jack Leland reported in the *New York Daily News*, “Dawn Pepita Hall, a British born male before a sex change operation last October, changed her name tonight, marrying her former butler, a negro. Wearing a full-length white gown with

a 12-foot train, the thin, brown-haired Miss Hall entered the wedding room in her restored Charleston mansion to the strains of ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic’ and was married to John-Paul Simmons, 30. 25 guests and a handful of newsmen witnessed the 20-minute ceremony, performed by the Reverend William Singleton, a negro who appeared ill at ease.”

The tabloid also reported, “Miss Hall said the news had not been received so joyfully in Charleston’s top society, in which Gordon Langley Hall, the man, once moved freely.”

The Holy City’s upper crust could abide a gay man, apparently, but a transsexual married to a black servant was just too

much for Hall’s friends and neighbors. They closed ranks, turning their backs on the bon vivant who had brought so much life and glamor to their parties.

The family would leave Charleston as social outcasts, their money gone, and their Society Street home sold. They moved to New York, where they became parents to baby Natasha, in 1971.

The couple divorced in 1982, with Hall claiming physical abuse. Not long after, her husband was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Hall eventually returned to Charleston to live with her daughter until her death in 2000 from Parkinson’s disease.

Upon John-Paul Simmons’ death in 2012, Edward Gilbreth of Charleston’s *The Post and Courier* wrote, “Now the final chapter of their remarkable story is over. If this isn’t a great tale warranting serious study and historical context, then I don’t know what is.

“Because even today, the story makes waves and raises the very contemporary issues of gender identification, racism in America, interracial marriage, class disparity, mental illness, body dysmorphism and the way some people are treated when the only crime they commit is being true to themselves.” ©

# TIMELINE

**1982:** Harriet Hancock establishes the state's first chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

**1982:** Gay student group seeks official status at the University of South Carolina. Tony Price files suit after application is denied. He wins case in 1983.

**1985:** The state's first HIV/AIDS service organization, Palmetto AIDS Life Support Services, opens in Columbia.

**1988:** Comprehensive Health Education Act passes, prohibiting discussion of non-heterosexual relationships except in the context of disease prevention.

**1989:** Reacting to a bill mandating quarantine of people with HIV, ACT UP stages "die-in" at State House, with 41 arrested. The bill fails.

**1990:** First Pride march held in Columbia.

**1992:** Greater Columbia Community Relations Council publishes study that leads to the city passing housing and employment protections.

**1993:** South Carolina Gay and Lesbian Business Guild is founded.

**1993:** PALSS Director Bill Edens files lawsuit contesting the exclusion of people with AIDS from the state's insurance risk pool. He dies before the case comes to trial.

**1993:** First LGBT community-owned center opens in Columbia. It is renamed the Harriet Hancock Center in 2005.

**1993:** Legislature removes buggery law from criminal code, a move vetoed by Gov. Carroll Campbell. Lawmakers reinstate the archaic language.

**1996:** South Carolina passes Defense of Marriage Act, a constitutional amendment denying legal recognition to unmarried couples.

**1996:** Greenville County Council passes resolution declaring homosexuality incompatible with community standards.

**1998:** Mayor of Myrtle Beach joins business and church leaders to oppose Pride rally. Their efforts backfire.

**1998:** Alliance for Full Acceptance is founded in Charleston.

**2002:** Activists meet to address the lack of statewide coordination between LGBT organizers, and establish the South Carolina Equality Coalition, now SC Equality.

**2003:** US Supreme Court strikes sodomy laws nationwide.

**2004:** State Republican Party calls for firing gay schoolteachers.

**2005:** Rainbow Radio goes on air. In 2010, *Out Loud, the Best of Rainbow Radio* is published. In 2014, the book stirs controversy after being

assigned to USC Upstate freshmen.

**2006:** First SC Black Pride.

**2007:** Sean Kennedy is attacked outside a Greenville bar for being gay. He dies from his injuries. His mother, Elke Kennedy, launches campaign on his behalf, helping to pass the Hate Crime Prevention Act in 2009.

**2014:** Marriage equality prevails in South Carolina. ☺



## Mother's Day

Stacy Smallwood

as a child, i remember mother's back  
beneath my feet,  
crushing her tension into wine between my toes  
hoping this would help her sleep deeper  
and wake up more flesh than granite.  
i worried about breaking her,  
that my feet might find a fault  
along the line of her spine  
and split her,  
but she reassured me  
bearing me on her back is what a mother is built for.

so i kept walking,  
moving mountains beneath my heels  
to give her some relief,  
amazed at this steel strength glowing  
under my soles,  
but unwilling to share the weight of my difference with her  
even though I knew at that young age.

last night, under a warm spring moon, i met another woman  
whose back was cast in titanium and iron.  
a woman named harriet hancock.  
an entire state came out to thank her  
for helping to organize south carolina's first pride march  
fifteen years ago,  
digging hands in dying earth  
commanding it to bear rainbow fruit,  
fighting death threats and legislators  
helping men to leave the sewers

and dance in the glory of sun  
on one saturday morning every year,  
all because her son had the courage to say  
"i'm gay."

i can only imagine how the blood erupted in his face  
when he turned to tell her,  
forcing seas to swell and spill over his eyes  
as he squeezed the words out of his gut,  
how his muscles wove like rope to hang him  
as he stood before the only person his face could never lie to,  
how he ground his teeth into salt that dissolved in his mouth  
and burned a tongue that would rather roll into his lungs  
and hide until danger passed  
than confess his sins to one who had already forgiven him.

two words  
that inspired a woman  
to change the world.

And this is what i want for you, mother;  
a broken but complete son to love,  
with as few shadows as possible  
and an honest tongue.  
but how do i tell you,  
the woman who always said "don't you ever bring  
a white woman home to me"  
that i'd rather bring a black man instead?  
how do you wrap that in a ribbon  
and say "happy mother's day"?



but this is what i bring home to you,  
 stomach knotted, knees weak,  
 butterflies and chainsaws in flux.  
 but i need to stand on your back again,  
 want you to know the comfort  
 of your son's naked feet  
 digging and burying secrets where he knows  
 they'll be safe,  
 hoping your body won't reject them.  
 maybe you'll cry under the weight  
 the same way i have,  
 or maybe you'll tense your muscles  
 and erode me out of your soil,  
 or maybe you'll find the cause you were never searching for,  
 a reason to post a parade down gatesville's only street  
 a whole new way to love your broken child back together  
 and tell him it's okay,  
 that God doesn't make mistakes.  
 perhaps you'll lie to me and tell me i'm perfect  
 just as i am,  
 and i might believe it.  
 but i'm so scared now,  
 scared to turn the only woman i've ever loved against me  
 scared to confirm her greatest christian fears,  
 scared to watch her steel melt around my ankles,  
 praying my answers to her questions  
 could become her cause  
 and not my crucifix.



*Stacy W. Smallwood's work has been featured in open mics, slams, workshops and cultural arts events across the United States. This poem was featured in Out Loud: The Best of Rainbow Radio.*



In the summer of 2005, a group of friends began talking about producing a radio show by and about the LGBT community in South Carolina. “The focus of the show was on the people, the stories, and the issues of gays and lesbians in South Carolina,” said Ed Madden, one of the show’s producers.

Rainbow Radio began broadcasting on Sunday mornings from a small studio in Columbia. A program promotion announced, “For far too long, talk radio airwaves have been dominated by the people who talk about us. Starting this fall, we speak for ourselves!”

While the original goal was to get LGBT stories into the mainstream media, the introduction of a constitutional amendment in 2005 banning same-sex marriage in South Carolina gave the work added urgency. “Faced with legislation that said some families deserve protection and other families—our families—don’t, we felt that telling our stories mattered more than ever,” Madden said.

The program was so well-received, Madden and Candace Chelley-Hodge assembled an anthology of selected essays in *Out Loud: The Best of Rainbow Radio*, published in 2010 by Hub City Press. The book was dedicated to Harriet Hancock.

*Out Loud* stirred controversy when USC Upstate assigned it to freshmen. Conservative lawmakers, one calling it “taxpayer-funded pornography,” objected by cutting funding for the university, a move Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter said during debate amounted to “pushing our own moral agenda on institutions of higher learning.” ⊙

## Author's Note

I met Harriet Hancock in 1990, when I wrote a profile of her for the South Carolina Bar magazine, my first job out of college. It turned out to be more than a story for me; it was a revelation. Harriet, Bill Edens, and the other pioneers at PALSS were part of a community like I'd never seen before. Everyone was welcome. Everyone was valued.

I was so impressed with the work they were doing that I became a PALSS buddy, an experience that opened my eyes and shifted my priorities. Within months, I quit my job to take over a struggling alternative newspaper. What I thought would be a temporary gig lasted 10 years.

*POINT* ran dozens of gay-related pieces—on everything from the AIDS crisis to banned books to hate crimes to Columbia's drag scene to the pandering, grandstanding, and moralizing that often passes for legislating in the State House. These stories gave me greater empathy and insight into what was then a largely invisible population.

In 1996, I was part of a group that met at Penn Center to form the SC Progressive Network, a grassroots coalition working for good government, healthy

communities, and an informed electorate in the Palmetto State.

Debate at that first statewide meeting centered on whether to keep the coalition narrow, as a consultant advised, or open it to anyone who supported our mission. We chose inclusiveness, welcoming labor organizers, pro-choice advocates, and gay activists—knowing it meant risking potential funding and allies.

It was the best decision we ever made. A history of having each other's backs—even when inconvenient—has made us a stronger coalition, built on mutual trust and the respect that grows from shared experience.

Our gay allies have brought great political skills and creative energy to the Network. It's hard to imagine the past 20 years without them.

This project has only deepened my admiration and affection for Harriet. While I knew her to be a good lawyer and

savvy organizer, I didn't know about her life as a young wife and mother. It is that part of her story that impresses me most. Not only was she brave enough to pack up her kids in the middle of the night and go underground—with no skills, no money, no safety net; she completely

reinvented herself. In mid-life, she dared to dream bigger.

It strikes me that Harriet's professional life is book ended by funerals and weddings. Early on, she was burying friends, many of them in the prime of their lives. Now, she is marrying friends—more than a dozen so far—many of them older couples who waited decades to be wed. The

years between those bookends span a remarkable arc of love and compassion.

It has been a privilege to tell Harriet's story, however incompletely. I thank her, the Hancock family, and the elders in South Carolina's LGBT movement who were so generous with their time.



Becci Robbins  
*Communications Director*  
*SC Progressive Network*

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Video and audio recordings of interviews made for this booklet are archived at the Modjeska Simkins School, a project of the SC Progressive Network.

**This booklet is a project of the SC Progressive Network, a grassroots coalition of groups and individual activists working together to promote social and economic justice in the Palmetto State. Now celebrating 20 years of organizing, the Network invites you to join us!**

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## What's in a name? If it's Monteith, plenty.

This booklet was created as a companion to one the SC Progressive Network published in 2014 that profiled South Carolina human rights matriarch Modjeska Monteith Simkins. In a remarkable twist, it turns out that Harriet Hancock and Modjeska Simkins are related, a fact only discovered during the course of this project.

Harriet had heard of Simkins many years earlier through her sister Diane, who had seen her at a public event and was so impressed that she called to tell her about it. Diane noted that they shared the name Monteith and wondered if they might be related.

Harriet didn't think much about it again until she read the booklet, which prompted her to start looking for connections in

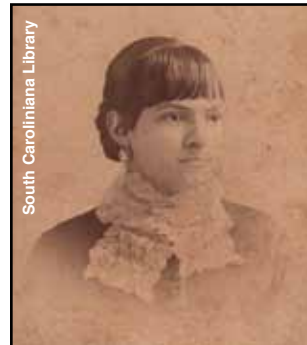
their family histories. She was astonished to find that they are blood relatives.

“My great grandmother Mary Monteith McCabe and Modjeska’s father Henry Monteith are half-brother and -sister,” she said. “Well, I can tell you that I got so excited about that! I really appreciate the fact that she was an activist, and I’m an activist.

**“It doesn’t matter whether it’s about race or sexual orientation or transgender issues—it’s all the same; it’s about civil rights.”**

Her research revealed that Henry’s father, Walter Shields Monteith, “was a scoundrel,” Harriet said, “but all of us have relatives we are not proud of. But I am sure proud to be related to Modjeska.

“She was such an accomplished, strong woman, and took a back seat to no one, so I am thrilled with my discovery. What a great thing to share her bloodline!” ☺



Mary Monteith McCabe



Henry Monteith