

Headdress Ball History

by Saw Ewing, co-founder of Headdress Ball

In 1987, after losing my friend, Patrick Bryan, to AIDS, I wanted to do something to make sense out of this loss. I decided to get involved with a local AIDS support group called Hope and Help. At the time, Hope and Help was a handful of volunteers working out of a room at The Unitarian Church in Orlando. It was also a time in Orlando when it was not particularly in vogue to associate one's self with HIV/AIDS. I went to the church and asked what I could do to help.

Welcomed with open arms, I was asked to help find much needed funds for the agency. That same evening I met my friend Hattie Wolfe at Dexter's for dinner. I shared with her my introduction to Hope and Help and their needs for financial help. The two of us got on the phone that evening and called our friends asking for their help. We raised \$6,000, and suddenly we were heroes at Hope and Help. We were also asked to join the board where we found ourselves in charge of fundraising. Having already exhausted our list of friends, we realized we needed to come up with a fundraiser.

Our idea was to have a floral headdress competition between local florists. The Beecham Theatre was the scene for what was then called "A Night Blooming". A couple of the florists realized that drag queens could carry heavier headdresses than could the average female and decided to take advantage of this. Because we did not have enough headdresses to make an evening of it, we decided to have the drag queens entertain between the competitors. The drag queens were a tremendous hit with the audience and have been a major part of the event ever since.

After the success of the event the second year at The Beecham, we felt we were ready to move to a bigger venue. By year three the event was upgraded to "black tie" and dinner at The Radison Hotel. That was the year Lee James wore a g-string while modeling his headdress, and the crowd went wild running to the stage to stuff money in his costume. That's when we decided to add strippers to the event. The strippers were so popular with our major donor, Harriet Lake, that they are now known as "The Harriet Lake Dancers".

By year four, the event was known as "The Headdress Ball, Orlando's Most Outrageous Black Tie Event!". We moved to the ballroom at The Peabody Hotel. It was suddenly "the" Ball to attend and voted "Orlando's Favorite Charity Ball".

Headdress Balls have been held at Walt Disney World's Swan and Dolphin Hotels, The Rosen Hotel, Universal Studio's Royal Pacific Hotel, and The Omni at Champion's Gate. This year's 20th Anniversary Ball will be held at the new Hilton hotel on International Drive on October 3rd, 2009 and will be co-chaired by Sam Ewing and Brad Grosberg.

No longer merely a floral headdress competition, the ball has evolved into an evening of Las Vegas type entertainment with a cast of over 100 people. The event features headdresses of every description, dancers, showgirls and boys, cocktails, dinner, dancing, and a live auction. In addition, 150 volunteers work to make the evening a success. The event is open to 1000 guests, and it has raised over \$3,000,000 for The Hope and Help Center.

Patrick would be proud.