

IN MEMORIAM

A life celebrated and remembered**Gay Pioneer & Drag Legend Danny Leonard aka "Brandy Alexander" passes away at age 70**

by Shane Windmeyer, aka Buff Faye :: guest contributor

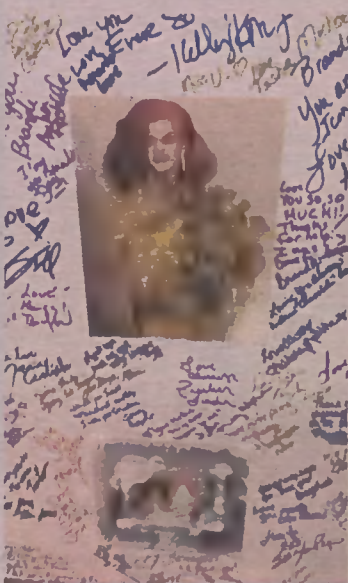
Over a hundred friends and family gathered in the early evening on Saturday, March 26 at Chaser's Charlotte for the "Brandy Alexander Celebration of Life Memorial Service." Danny Leonard [Brandy Leonard] passed away on Monday, March 21, 2016, at the age of 70.

As a drag legend, Alexander will hold a place in history as one of the most popular female impersonators in the South. In 1979, she was crowned the very first Miss Gay North Carolina America and she also won the first state title for Miss Gay North Carolina U.S.ofA. in 1986. She performed in the Queen City and across the South from the 1960s and continued until recent years.

The "Celebration of Life" featured tributes and drag performances of Alexander's favorite songs by her drag family and dear friends Kelly Ray Shelton, Terri Lovo, John Elvis, Macy Alexander, Shana Nicole, as well as memories shared by Greg Brafford and Janice Covington Allison. The mood among the crowd was loving, and yet lively remembering both the drag legend Alexander and the gay pioneer Leonard.

"That voice. When Brandy spoke people listened," said Shane Curtis, aka Shana Nicole, who performed that night one of Brandy's favorite numbers "I Did It My Way." "Her wisdom has certainly impacted my life and drag career and she is someone I have always been proud to call a sister. And that sisterhood forged a bond that lasted Brandy and me a lifetime. May we always remember her for the survivor and the pioneer that she was... But may we also remember the incredible talent and character that was Brandy Alexander. She truly did it — as the song says — 'MY WAY'... Love you Brandy."

Long-time friend and another southern drag legend Ricky Carter, aka Boom Boom LaTour,



Many wrote tributes to Brandy Alexander in her memory.

emceed the memorial service sharing stories about Alexander between numbers.

"A lot of people didn't know Brandy was a member of a circus. She was a clown and that's how she started in drag... well anyway," said Carter. "Lord she would have loved it. All the songs played were songs she had done for years. The memories, the laughter... she would have loved it."

Among many life accomplishments, Leonard/Alexander owned Friends Lounge in Jacksonville, N.C. Friends Lounge was the only gay bar in the country that was officially off-limits for military personnel. Because it was located near Camp Lejeune Marine Base, any Marine who was caught there would be in jeopardy and at-risk of being discharged dishonorably. The local sherriff had waged an all-out attack on the bar nightly. The bar was frequently raided by police and it was commonplace for patrons to suffer undue harassment and violence.

In the fall of 1988 in an article in "Southern Exposure," Leonard was quoted, "When I was doing drag in Florida in 1964, we were pulled out of bars and beaten by cops with billy clubs. I've been put in a jail probably 50 times. They'd pull paddy wagons up and put all the female impersonators and owners in, then fine us for being in women's clothes. They used to make us strip down, and we had to have three items of male clothing. So

we'd wear three pairs of jockey shorts under our dresses. What was going on in Jacksonville reminded me of that. Bars have

changed an awful lot since then. There are more of them, they're more open. I don't want to see these kids go through what I went through."

Leonard as a gay activist was one of the best known in the southern region in the 1970s and 1980s. His perseverance and leadership in the face of adversity, as well as his fundraising efforts organizing benefits for people with AIDS, were truly the work of a gay southern pioneer. He had helped to raise

\$350,000 at the time for supporting people with AIDS — more than the entire state of North Carolina had contributed to fight the epidemic back then. Shortly

*"To think I did all that,
And may I say — not in a shy way,
"Oh no, oh no not me,
I did it my way."
For what is a man, what has he got?
If not himself, then he has naught.
To say the things he truly feels;
And not the words of one who kneels.
The record shows I took the blows —
And did it my way!
Yes, it was my way."*

Shana Nicole pays tribute to Brandy Alexander by performing Alexander's favorite song, 'I Did It My Way.'



after Leonard's passing, it was announced that an outdoor mural project titled "Drag Queens of the Queen City" will feature Brandy Alexander, as well as other Charlotte drag legends. The mural will be painted in the Plaza-Midwood area starting in April.

In memory of his life, Brafford, a close friend and the bar owner of the Woodshed in Charlotte, N.C., asked everyone at the memorial service to remember this: "I want you to remember one thing about Brandy. That girl had balls. She wasn't scared of a redneck in Lexington, North Carolina, when she was growing up. She wasn't scared of the police in Florida when they locked her up. She wasn't scared of a six-foot-five Marine with a baseball bat in Jacksonville. She wasn't scared of a fire when they burned her house down. She wasn't scared of a bomb when they blew her bar up and she sure as fuckin' hell wasn't scared of cancer."

For many in the Charlotte drag community, it is difficult to believe that Leonard and his drag persona Brandy Alexander are no longer with us. And yet through the words of her favorite songs we will hold dear forever. ::



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