

CLOSER's History
by Ben H. Streets, III

After Carlos telephoned Tuesday morning with an invitation from the Executive Committee to write a historical perspective of CLOSER for the 10th anniversary celebration, my mind was filled with questions. Why has CLOSER survived and prospered these past ten years when cities twice, three times, ten times as large as Asheville have failed to develop or sustain gay support organizations? Why has CLOSER been able to attract such a diverse gathering of individuals from Western North Carolina and sustain their involvement? Why have so many individuals come forth each year to voluntarily lead CLOSER with such great devotion and dedication? I am sure that each of you have your own questions about this eminently successful group we call CLOSER.

Ten years ago a rather small group of gay men living in the Asheville area saw a need. They believed that the historical center of gay life, the gay bar, was not enough, i.e., could not sufficiently fulfill the needs of gay men and women. The organization they founded was never meant to be an alternative to the gay bar, but rather a supplement. They couldn't possibly have selected a better name for this new group, Community Liaison Organization for Support, Education, and Reform. What a stroke of genius! There is such comfort, such hope, such promise in this name. It says that we want to be part of the greater community. We want to support our own...educate ourselves so that we can better educate others about us...gain reforms that will enhance our lives.

An early controversy about membership was resolved on the side of accessibility to all. The annual membership fee was purposely set at a low rate which it was believed everyone could afford. Any notion of exclusiveness or that CLOSER would be a CLUB was vanquished. It was also decided early that CLOSER would have absolutely no religious or political affiliations. After only a few months' existence, we welcomed the opportunity to meet in the lovely Parish Hall of All Souls Episcopal Church in Biltmore. Yet, we remained separate and apart. Over the years, we've discussed religion, politics and political candidates as to their impact on our lives as gay men and women. Yet, we've remained separate and apart. Those who desired more religious and political involvement were encouraged to form organizations to achieve those purposes. Yet, CLOSER remained a separate group focused upon its own motivations of support, education and reform. Perhaps, if there has been one underlying key to our success it is the fact that we have stayed focused on who we are, i.e. gay men and women. Our weekly programs have and must continue to reflect this fact. Our gayness is what draws us together, men and women, young and old. We represent a variety of occupations, races and lifestyles. The bond we share is our sexual orientation.

It is much more difficult to address the devotion and dedication exhibited by CLOSER leadership during the past decade. It would be unfair and incorrect to assume that our gay community has a pool of uniquely talented and dedicated individuals. Such persons exist all over the country. Perhaps our extreme devotion and involvement is born out of need—need for organization and unity in the face of area religious fundamentalism; need to support one another when family rejection and prejudice rails against us. Ten years ago not one of us imagined that our greatest enemy at the end of the 80's decade would be a plague, a disease that would take members from us and place others in a tight grip of fear. From the need born of this deadly reality, CLOSER has been there to offer an oasis of support, comfort and love. Whatever the need, individuals have in varying ways stepped forth to lead us, to plan our activities and build