

# The Front Page

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## An Interview With Charlotte Activist & Entrepreneur Don King. . .

by Jim Baxter

In late March, *The Front Page* received a letter from Don Puntch, leader of Charlotte's Acceptance group, announcing a "Don King Night" on May 3rd, to honor Don's contributions to the gay community. "Don has been a force behind all of the gay organizations that we have and has acted as our gay spokesman," the letter read. "He has done so much for the gay community here in Charlotte (and in North Carolina) that we feel this is something long overdue."

*The Front Page* couldn't agree more. So, we decided to do this interview, which is also long overdue. It took place by telephone, and the interviewer's questions and remarks have been edited out in the interest of brevity.

The interview began by asking Don King how he became an activist and why? Did it stem from his time in Chapel Hill as a student?

No, I was in Chapel Hill a long time ago, before there was gay activism of any kind. I went to UNC-Chapel Hill in '61, '62, '63 and part of '64. I never graduated, oddly enough. I majored in poker and bridge. I still, to this day, play poker and bridge. As a matter of fact, aside from work, the only time I'm around non-gay people is during my weekly poker game.

I've always been sort of competitive, and I guess my poker playing is one sign of that. But that competitiveness didn't come out until I did, and I mean until I came out of the closet totally. I wasn't a sports-minded person, so I wasn't able to be competitive that way when I was in high school. I competed by writing about the sports at Tarboro High School, where I'm from, for the local paper. They paid by the inch, and I wrote the longest football and basketball stories you've ever seen. Every player got his name mentioned.

It was in '77, I think, when I first heard that a Dignity group was going to be formed in Charlotte and I was invited to the meeting. I had talked to a priest down here about the

possibility of starting one about six months before that, but never took any action on it.

*Was your marriage Catholic?*

No, I got married in '67, separated in '71, and Jane and I never were particularly church goers. I became interested in Catholicism for a while, but today I guess I'd say I'm more of a Universalist. I came out for the first time 3 months after my wife and I broke up in June of '71, and I went to my first bar: The Pegasus, which was in Carrboro, just outside of Chapel Hill.

This was the first gay bar that I had ever been into, and I was taken there by this kid that I had met in a wig shop. The shop was right across the street from where I worked, and I sometimes had dinner with the wife of a fellow I worked with. She introduced me to these two gay guys, one of whom later turned out to be the performer, Jimmy Dee.

There was another black dude working there, and I got to know him pretty well, and he carried me to the Pegasus in Chapel Hill. I realized then that this was where I should have been the whole time. But, anyway, in the meantime, the divorce came through the next summer and I moved to Charlotte. This was partly because one of the guys where I worked asked me one afternoon: "Don, what was your car doing over at that black hairdresser's house?"

Well, I realized then that Durham was too small for me. I couldn't, at that time, really get into being in a town where was personal business was that well-known. So, when I heard about a job opening in Charlotte, I applied, and was accepted.

One of the most influential people that I met after I moved to Charlotte was an Eastern Orthodox Catholic priest named Michael Bruce Wood, who actually conducted services at Oleen's here for a while. He had been a drama and speech teacher at a Catholic college, and had then been hired for the drug program here in Charlotte as a counselor. Then the federal funds ran out of that project.

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Partner Marty Spencer and Don King at the N.C. Gay Conference.

## DON KING NIGHT — MAY 3, 1983

The Acceptance Club of Charlotte will Honor one of its founders on Tues. night May 3rd. The event will start with a covered dish dinner at 7:30 and will continue with short speeches and talks from Don's friends.

Acceptance is an Educational/Social Club that meets at the Park Road Baptist Church each Tues. night. There are over 100 members with an average attendance of about 40. It is a very informal group, open to anyone. There are no officers, no dues, no membership rolls. Its just a group which gets together to make friends and learn from each other.

Don King, along with about 4 others, founded the groups as "Dignity" back in 1977. He was the leader and it grew at one point to an average attendance of 60. After about 1 1/2 years as leader, he gave it up to move on to other activities. The group tried a more formal structure under the new leadership for the next year but attendance declined until there were about a 1/2 dozen regular attenders. At this point it dropped its national affiliation with "Dignity" and became a local group called Acceptance.

After Don's fine leadership with Dignity he formed the Gay Political group called The Gay Caucus. This group ran for about a year and a half before it grew weak due to the loss of some key leadership figures.

Don then moved on to form the QCQ (Queen City Quordinators) which was a

money raising group to help all Gay groups in the city with their fund raising. This group grew under his leadership and they had about 6 events a year during his 2 year leadership. The big event this group started was "Gay Pride Week" in 1981 and "Gay Pride Day" in 1982. Other events were in the Bars with special themes, such as "Wearing of the Green," "Fantasy in White", "Chest Contest", "Buns Contest", "Women night", etc., etc.

Don also gave assistance to getting the Gay/Lesbian Switchboard started (525-6128). This has proven to be one of the best things for the Gay Community in Charlotte.

Over all this time Don has been the Gay Spokesman for our community to the press and media. He has answered any and all criticism that has come our way, and has had many "letters to the editor" and had debates with local pastors on TV and radio who have tried to wage war against us.

Through all of this, Don has remained a loyal member of Acceptance and has helped in a large percentage of the programs. He goes to local colleges and speaks to all types of classes (sexuality) in an effort to develop a better understanding between gays & straights.

Charlotte is proud of Don King and we want to honor him with this special night. We invite any and all (Gay and Straight) to join with us this night for one of our own.

— Don Puntch

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