

AIDS Fund to honor leaders at black-tie event

By **Angela Thomas**
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AIDS Fund is ready to glam up the city for its 14th annual Black-Tie GayBINGO.

The black-tie affair will start at 6:30 p.m. March 1 in the Crystal Tea Room, 100 Penn Square East. Tickets are \$150 and can be purchased at aidsfundphilly.com.

The event will include a dinner, six BINGO games, a silent auction and dancing. Proceeds will support AIDS Fund's mission of funding area HIV/AIDS service organizations.

According to executive director Robb Reichard, the event is expected to be bigger than ever, with a guest list of more than 225 supporters.

While there will be some new additions to the lineup, Reichard said the event's format is always a community favorite.

"We are always trying to do new things to freshen it up for participants. We have a couple surprises for our guests this year, but the overall formula for the event works so well and our guests enjoy it so much," he said.

AIDS Fund, which hosts monthly GayBINGO events to raise money and awareness for HIV/AIDS, will present its Founders' Award to ActionAIDS director of development Michael Byrne, the Ferrara Family Volunteer Award to former AIDS Fund director of operations Africa Jones and the Favorite Straight Person of the Year Award to longtime former state Rep. Babette Josephs.

Reichard said Byrne was an easy candidate for the honor.

"He has been involved in the fight against HIV in our community for two decades," Reichard said.

Byrne, who has worked for 13 years at ActionAIDS, is also the original co-host of GayBINGO in his drag persona, Carlotia Tendant.

"He is an incredible performer and, in addition to the efforts he has done with the AIDS Fund, he works in the HIV/AIDS community and helps raise funds for HIV/AIDS research," Reichard said.

Byrne, who previously volunteered and worked for AIDS Fund, credited his colleagues at ActionAIDS with inspiring his own work.



MICHAEL BYRNE

continually impressed by the sense of community among the various HIV/AIDS organizations in Philadelphia.

"Regardless of who you are raising money for, we are all supportive of each other's work," he said. "We realize that no agency does this by themselves, no individual does this by themselves; we are all in this together."

Byrnes, who has lost loved ones to AIDS, said the Founders' Award is appreciated not just on a professional but also a personal level.

"I started volunteering and then working

at the AIDS Fund because I felt the need to make a difference and help folks that were afflicted by a disease that took the lives of some of my friends and family. It was something that really pulled at my heart," he said.

Jones, who started work at AIDS Fund in August 2000, said she was immediately impressed that the organization was so closely committed to the community, and that its commitment yielded visible results.

"For an organization like AIDS Fund with such a small budget to make such a large impact on the community organizations it funds is an amazing demonstration to us as individual donors," she said. "It reminds us that you do not need to have a lot to make a difference."

Jones has volunteered for AIDS Fund since 2007 and is also involved in volunteer activities with Shades Of Image and Women With Outbursts of Love, Inc.

Reichard said Jones has been a unique volunteer because of her deep knowledge of the organization as a former employee.

"We know she can just jump in and take a leadership role as a volunteer. It is wonderful having someone there that we know and trust. One of the things we look for in a volunteer award recipient is commitment to the issues, longevity of service and somebody who makes the life of the AIDS Fund staff easier, and she has done just that over the years," he said.

Jones said through her work at AIDS Fund, she has become more cognizant of the evolving issues in the HIV/AIDS community.

"I have become aware of the very-ongoing needs for funding and support for the AIDS-service organizations in the Philadelphia area," she said.

Jones considers it a particular honor to be the recipient of the Ferrara Family Volunteer Award since she volunteered and got to know its namesakes, Immy and Phil Ferrera, during her time at AIDS Fund.

"Their passion and drive as volunteers is remarkable. I only wish that I could do more," she said.

Reichard said Josephs was selected for her long commitment to advocating for both the LGBT and HIV/AIDS communities.

"She was one of the first legislators to really fight for HIV/AIDS legislation. She was involved early on in the HIV Confidentiality Act in Pennsylvania and we wanted to recognize that longtime commitment," he said. ■



AFRICA JONES

