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## Dignity Norfolk: How One Tidewater Group Enabled Gay and Lesbian Catholics to Form Long Lasting Friendships and Chosen Families

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# Queer History Exhibition

## Dignity Norfolk

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WMST 303, Queer Studies

Professor Rhodes

December 2021

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### The Backstory

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The Queer History Exhibition began as a big project. A big project that would take a lot of time. I searched for a location or club that looked and sounded

stuck. I wasn't finding any information on the locations, and people I thought were fascinating, and the time to choose a topic was running out.

Professor Rhodes stepped in

and the organization deserved more attention and an in-depth look into how the community was served by Dignity. I jumped in full swing realizing all research would be initially very foreign to me; someone raised

**Dignity Norfolk is/was an organization of volunteers in the Hampton Roads area that brought Catholic gay men and lesbians together to worship, discuss, and enjoy various group activities.**

cool. I thought, why not find a swanky, interesting bar to research that will be easy and fun. Maybe I could find one that was still open and visit the bar in person. I landed on a few intriguing ideas, but nothing

and suggested Dignity Norfolk, an organization that supported Catholic gay men and lesbian women in the Hampton Roads area. Professor Rhodes mentioned research for Dignity Norfolk was far from complete,

without religion and no direct connection to the LGBTQIA+ community. Although I am currently connected to the LGBTQIA+ community, I am definitely not connected to any religious group.

## The Research Begins

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Dignity Norfolk is/was an organization of volunteers in the Hampton Roads area that brought Catholic gay men and lesbians together to worship, discuss, and enjoy various group activities. According to Scott Wyatt and Joe Amos, former members of Dignity Norfolk, it was a place to feel connected and build a chosen family. Dignity Norfolk was more than a religiously affiliated group for gay men and lesbian women. It was a place to feel like a home base. It was a social connection. It was a chosen family whose connections continued into 2021.

## Realizing Dignity More Than A Religious Group

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As I trudged through the research, I realized I was uncovering more than just information about a religiously affiliated gay and lesbian support organization. I was uncovering stories about people's lives. I was getting to

know people that were both deceased and living. I was invited into a time where I never lived and never experienced opened up to me. I was allowed the opportunity to see what life was like for a struggling gay or lesbian Catholic in Hampton Roads at



the time. What started as a simple project turned into a narrative winding through the chosen family of a few men and women connected by faith, sexuality, and a shared experience.

## Our Own Ads and Jack

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Throughout my research, I saw a recurring name, "Jack." The listing would have a phone number and the name Jack: "Call Jack for more information regarding Dignity Norfolk." Who was Jack, I wondered.

Why wasn't Jack's last name listed? Jack's contact information seemed to be in every Our Own copy I read.

I imagined a gay man or lesbian woman living in the 1980s Hampton Roads area, seeking out religious conversation and support, would have found these ads to be approachable

and potentially spark curiosity enough to attend a Dignity Norfolk Meeting.

During an interview with Joe Amos and Scott Wyatt, two former members of Dignity

weren't necessarily looking for a way to connect to their former Catholic lives, but merely finding a new spiritual home and trying to connect their spirituality with their sexuality

Catholic church and provide mass regularly. They were at the whims of catholic priests who could either decide to perform a mass or turn down the group.

**...many of the group's members weren't necessarily looking for a way to connect to their former Catholic lives, but merely finding a new spiritual home, and trying to connect their spirituality with their sexuality and identity.**

Norfolk, Joe mentioned he didn't attend a meeting the first time he went to the location of the meeting. Joe did a stakeout of sorts. He watched the entrance as the meeting started, checked out who was attending and wanted to figure out if this was a safe thing for him to be a part of. He wanted to make sure he was going to a group that would be accepting of him and that he would fit in. After his first original observation of Dignity Norfolk, he decided the next time he would actually go in the building.

Joe and Scott mentioned that many of the group's members

and identity-- Catholicism.

### **Prayer and Sometimes Mass**

Scott and Joe explained that although prayer and mass were readily discussed in an open forum at the Dignity Norfolk Meetings, mass was not always held as sometimes they were unable to get an ordained priest to preside over the mass. For everyday Catholics with no connection to the LGBTQIA+ community, it may seem unfortunate or even unkind that this group, although they tried, was unsuccessful in becoming a mainstream religious group with the ability to meet at a

### **One's Chosen Family**

Joe Amos described during our interview that the first meeting he attended after scoping out the place was the best Sunday of his life up to that moment. Joe felt loved, understood, and connected. Similar to Joe's story, many members of Dignity Norfolk became somewhat involved within their first few months of membership. They would grow to love themselves more through worship, self-reflection, and bible study.

## **A Little More on Jack (John) Jacknik**

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Jack Jacknik founded Dignity Norfolk as a sister chapter to Dignity/Integrity Richmond. He introduced all new members around and would constantly be reminding everyone there was a social coming up or a trip to the sister group in Richmond. Dignity Norfolk and Dignity/Integrity Richmond attended Busch Gardens in Williamsburg together one weekend. Following Busch Gardens, the group attended a play. What a wonderful night out to experience with others who share your struggles, of whom you have to hide less. What a beautiful experience.

## **Scott Wyatt and Joe Amos Share Some Memories**

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During the interview with Mr. Wyatt and Mr. Amos in Ghent, Norfolk, VA, Scott Wyatt opened up about his connection to Dignity Norfolk and how it still affects his relationship with friends today. He mentioned that family isn't always the

people you are related to by blood. That family can be whomever you choose, and dignity was the catalyst to Scott connecting to Joe and becoming lifelong friends.

Both Scott and Joe agreed; members of Dignity felt a sense of belonging within the group, a sense of familial bond, a sense of safety to discuss religious matters, and connect socially both during meetings and on outings planned by the group. A sort of instant built-in support system was immediately in place the minute one joined Dignity. Suddenly, there was a group to speak to or discuss the intersection of religion and sexuality. There were members who were available to discuss the religion that raised a good portion of the members, what that religion thought about them, and how they may try and find their place back within the Catholic faith.

Often discussions focused on being worthy of love from God and others, being worthy of saving. Discussions of

sexuality, love, life, and religion were brought together at many meetings. All those topics ended up falling under the umbrella of self-love and acceptance of gay men and lesbians. A crucial issue for both religious members of the community, lesbians and gay men, and gay people in general at the time and in the present-day (2021).

## **Back to Jack**

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All members of Dignity Norfolk got to know Jack Jacknik on a personal level. Jack founded Dignity Norfolk and was outspoken within the Catholic Church regarding Gay men's rights and what the Catholic Church intended to do about Gay men who were Catholic. As both Scott Wyatt and Joe Amos mentioned during our talk, Jack was brave, strong, and not afraid to ask a Catholic Bishop for an explanation.

## AIDS

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In the early 1980s, AIDS began to impact the Gay Men and Lesbian Women in the Hampton Roads area.

As the epidemic raged on, the number of those killed by AIDS and related causes rose exponentially. Scott and Joe mentioned AIDS killing more friends than they care to count or can even get a clear sense of.

## The Loss of a Good Man

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In mid-1987, six years after the initial findings and discovery of AIDS within the community, the new normal was far from normal.

Although terrified of contracting AIDS, many members of Dignity had relaxed a bit, prayed more, and hoped for a better tomorrow.

However, that tomorrow didn't come. Members of Dignity continued to lose those they loved, including the very

reason many attended a Dignity Meeting for the first time.

On June 2nd, 1987, Jack (John) Jacknik passed away from complications related to AIDS. According to Scott and Joe, everything had seemingly changed overnight. The support still withstanding; after such a loss, the group changed. The phone number in Dignity's directory listings and mini editorials changed from Jack's to another member. Life

of chosen families and connections for life.



Photo 3

### DIGNITY OF TIDEWATER

Dignity-Tidewater celebrated its second anniversary with a banquet at the Oar House on Saturday, October 6. Cocktails and a delicious steak dinner were followed by entertainment provided by Randy. Many speeches were made and the most memorable quote was "this group is my family and I love it as my family." The banquet was a joyous occasion filled with unity and fellowship.

In other news of Dignity-Tidewater, a trip to the mountains of Virginia is planned for the weekend of November 2. A mountain lodge has been selected for the weekend retreat and the autumn landscape should enrich the gathering. Later in the month a Thanksgiving dinner for the group is planned. For information about Dignity-Tidewater, please call Jack at 627-9182.

marched on.

Everything changed without Jack, but the fight moved forward with a continued legacy

Thank you for taking the time to read about my experience with the QHE.

If you have any more questions, I'd be happy to answer them.

-Chelsea Lumbert.



**Sources:**

Amos, Joe. (2021, November 17). Personal interview [Personal interview].

Wyatt, Scott. (2021, November 17). Personal interview [Personal interview].

Our Own, November 1979, pg 9

Our Own

**Photo Key**

Photo 1

Front Row L to R

**Edna Baden and Sue Vreeland**

Back Row L to R

**Guy Morris (passed),  
Andy Bailey (passed),  
Steve Hudak, Frank Marcucci  
and Ron Eicholtz (passed).**

Date Approx October 1980-86

Photo courtesy of  
Scott Wyatt



## Photo Key Continued

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Photo 2

Front Row L to R

**Sue Vreeland and Edna Baden.**

Back Row L to R

**Ron Eicholtz (passed),  
Andy Bailey (passed) and  
Frank Marcucci.**

Dignity Banquet

Location: St Andrews Episcopal  
Church Social Hall, West Ghent  
Norfolk, VA

“They were singing  
‘Mister Sandman’ as  
Entertainment.”

Date Approx October 1980-86

Photo courtesy of  
Scott Wyatt



Photo 3

**Jack (John) Jacknik**

Location: Home of home of  
Charles Warburton (passed) and  
Howard Hemmrich (passed)

Photo courtesy of  
Scott Wyatt

