

Gene Burkard, USAF

Gene Burkard, originally from Sheboygan, Wisconsin, served in the US Air Force for over three years from 1950-53, which included 15 months of foreign service. During his tenure he was awarded a National Defense Service Medal and a Good Conduct Medal.

Gene has lived in San Diego for over 40 years. In the early 1970s, he founded International Male – a mail-order catalogue business of men’s apparel – that became immensely popular with gay men across the United States. Gloria, a long-time friend and business collaborator of Gene’s, said, “Men felt proud to dress in a manner that acknowledged their uniqueness and beauty.” International Male provided gay men a positive, affirming image of themselves at a time when affirmation was thin.

The catalogue boasted a circulation of about two million, with outlet stores in San Diego and Los Angeles. For people born and raised after the advent of the digital age, it’s difficult to imagine the impact that International Male had on fashion, society, gay rights, and the development of social media. And as International Male grew, Gene provided employment opportunities for many members of our LGBT community. For many decades, Gene has been a quiet but impactful financial supporter of many LGBT organizations and AIDS-service organizations, including The San Diego LGBT Community Center, Mama’s Kitchen, The AIDS Assistance Fund, and Special Delivery San Diego. He often provided seed funding for program initiatives that have been instrumental in our community.

Gene lives in Mission Hills with Ron, his partner of many years. Thank you, Gene for your service to our country and for your generous support and positive impact on our LGBT community.

Lee Lozano-Osier, USN

Shortly after the terrorist attacks on September 11th, Lee decided to join the US Navy to support and defend the U.S. and its constitution. He joined in a little later in life than most, but that didn't deter him. He entered as a Mess Specialist and worked his way up to Second Class Petty Officer (E5) under the newly minted rating, Culinary Specialist.

During his enlistment, he served on the USS Kitty Hawk aircraft carrier and was deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Lee also served overseas in Japan and then here in San Diego, where he was honorably discharged after eight years of service with various awards and commendations in 2010.

While serving and since his discharge, Lee was a member of American Veterans for Equal Rights (AVER), which advocated for the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell"; he marched in the San Diego Veterans parade with an LGBT contingent; and he provided catering services at the Military Ball held at The Center. Because his spouse was also in the Navy, Lee became an active member of American Military Partner Association (AMPA), helping other spouses deal with the effects of deployment. As an early volunteer with Stonewall Citizen's Patrol, he helped establish the organization as a nonprofit, drafted bylaws and then served on its board for two years.

Lee also has been a player, coach, manager and now a board member for the AFCSL (America's Finest City Softball League). As a military spouse, he supported his husband through the end of his career by managing the production of the first LGBT military retirement ceremony to be held at The San Diego LGBT Community Center.

Lee has and always will support and advocate for our community.

Jackson Redmond, USA

Jackson Redmond's devotion to the community began like so many, at home in rural North Carolina. He was raised to work hard and be the best he could be. His interest in engineering and the desire to serve was welcomed in the US Army National Guard.

Jackson demonstrates the Army's core values even after leaving service in 2004 with loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage in all he does. He believes these seven core values are what a soldier and citizen is all about.

While on active duty, his unit deployed to the Republic of Moldova under a partnership with the United States. One of the main reasons for this program was to foster closer relations on non-military issues, such as education, health service, and humanitarian initiatives. His actions led to his award of the Army Achievement Medal. This inspired Jackson to never pass an opportunity up to continue his civil engineering and community service paths.

Living under the scrutiny of "don't ask don't tell" proved to be the hardest part of his enlistment. Having that added stress to his daily existence, Jackson left the service but not his community.

With all the environmental and legal barriers Jackson has encountered for just being a gay man and veteran, he has shown traits you see in almost every veteran of entrepreneurial spirit, being a fast and lifelong learner, loyalty, integrity, and having a strong work ethic.

Organizations in which Jackson is involved in, include San Diego Gay Men's Chorus, Lambda Archives, Stonewall Citizens' Patrol, Mama's Kitchen's annual Pie in the Sky, America's Finest City Softball League, Varsity Gay League Dodge Ball, San Diego Fire Department/CERT, Gay for Good - San Diego, San Diego Pride's build out team, and Wreaths Across America.

Bruce Shank, USAF

Wallace Bruce Shank, Jr. served in the U.S. Air Force from 1997 to 2001, receiving an honorable discharge in 2009 after combined service in both active and inactive reserve.

During his years of service, Shank received an Air Force Achievement Medal, Armed Forces Service Medal, Air Force Good Conduct Medal, Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, and a NATO Medal. His various contributions led directly to his unit receiving the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award.

Shank moved to San Diego in 2006 to pursue his career in civil aviation. This is where he first met and pursued his calling with The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Fully professed as Sister Gaia Love, he knew that San Diego was home. Sister Gaia served as the board chair of The San Diego Sisters, among other responsibilities with the order of the 21st century queer nuns.

While in San Diego he supported various LGBT organizations, including Family Health Center of San Diego, AIDS Walk, North County Pride, North County LGBTQ Resource Center, and many more.

Since he considers Balboa Park — where he first met the Sisters — his “Holy Land,” some of his volunteer work also centered on the famous park. In 2014, Sister Gaia Love appeared at the rededication of the California Tower, and sponsored a step leading up the Tower “In honor of the steps of our LGBTQ ancestors.”

Workforce realignments led to the closure of his San Diego office in 2015 and he has since relocated to San Francisco, where he currently lives. Sister Gaia is now treasurer and vice-chair of the national board of directors for The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Inc. He is also president of the Pink Triangle Park + Memorial — America’s first historical landmark and memorial to persecuted homosexuals of the Nazi Reich.

Sister Gaia looks forward to returning home to live in San Diego as soon as the opportunity presents itself.

Ruby Sola, USN

Ruby Sola served aboard the USS Howard W. Gilmore, a submarine tender, and the USS Claude V. Ricketts, a destroyer. Serving during the late 1970s, no one could be gay, let alone transgender and pursue her true gender identity.

Upon her discharge in Norfolk, Virginia, Ruby relocated to San Diego, where she volunteered with the San Diego AIDS Project in the 1980s. She was instrumental in facilitating some of the first safe sex classes at the AIDS Project and the Unitarian Universalist Church. She worked front and back offices with Dr. Brad Truax, one of the first doctors to address the AIDS crisis. She also collaborated with a local pharmacist, Joy Galloway, ensuring medications were covered for patients.

Ruby also did street outreach for the San Diego AIDS Project and was the Peer Advocate/Events Coordinator for the nonprofit "Being Alive."

She was a charter member of the transgender Latina group Transgenero 2000, San Diego's first support group for transgender monolingual and undocumented transgender women, which celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2020 and continues meeting at The Center.

Ruby remains active by advocating for the development of the North Park Senior Apartments, San Diego's first LGBT affirming senior housing complex. All of this was accomplished with a never-ending optimism in the promise of herself, her community, and her country.

Frank Stiriti, USN

Frank Stiriti was born on Aug. 4, 1944, in Massachusetts. He later graduated from Northern University in Boston.

Frank spent six years in the Naval Reserve from high school through college and then two years of active duty in Guam and Vietnam. He was discharged from active duty in San Diego in September of 1969 as Yeoman Second Class (YN2/E5), with over eight years total military service.

Frank has lived in San Diego ever since he left the Navy. In 1974, Frank, along with two partners, opened Vulcan Steam and Sauna Baths — a gay, 24/7, cash-only business — located at 805 West Cedar Street. Frank remained owner until it closed on April 18, 2013, after 39 years of catering to the male gay community. This bath house was one of the few in the United States that did not close with advent of the AIDS epidemic. Frank says that with the help of Jess Jessop — who had been a Hospital Corpsman in the Navy — they quickly produced brochures providing information on what was known of AIDS and advocating for safe sex. The Vulcan also provided free condoms.

He was also one of the original founders of the Greater San Diego Business Association, a board member of the Little Italy Business Association, and has been a generous supporter of many LGBT organizations throughout all these years.

In 2008, Frank was recognized for his community involvement and service by being selected for the Community Wall of Honor, located at the San Diego LGBT Community Center.

Frank and his partner, David Hardin, have been together for 43 years. The couple married in 2010 and live in Point Loma.

Gary Wayne Rees, USN (deceased)

The San Diego LGBT Community Center exists because of the grassroots work of Lieutenant Junior Grade (LTJG) Gary Wayne Rees. Gary was born in April 1974. He graduated from Ohio State University in 1969 and moved to San Diego in 1971, where he entered active duty in the U.S. Navy Reserves, serving from 1971 to 1974. He received the National Defense Service Medal.

While still in the Navy, LTJG Rees became a member of a small group called the "Planning Committee," which in 1972 became The Center for Social Service, Inc; that group became the San Diego Gay and Lesbian Center in 1973. He also helped establish the Military Counseling Program at The Center.

It would appear he received a General Discharge from the Navy as a result of his activities in the San Diego gay community. Upon his release from the Navy, he became the executive director of The Center until 1975.

Gary was also a former chair and director of the San Diego Walks for Life, the precursor to AIDS Walk San Diego. He helped found the AIDS Assistance Fund, the Lesbian and Gay Archives, and was a prominent businessman with three businesses in Golden Hill.

He died in August 1990 of AIDS in his San Diego home at the age of 43. In 2004, Gary was posthumously selected as one of the first inductees for The Center's Community Wall of Honor.

Mr. Rees' personal experience of being deeply closeted and not wanting to take the risk of causing emotional casualties, caused him to assert that LGBT people are denied positive role models and led him to the realization to "seek a life in which he lived openly; creating happiness, rather than misery and frustration."

The work Gary Rees started, nearly 50 years ago, helped create a haven for the San Diego LGBT community.