Community Cliffnotes
Dinnerfest RED Party + Auction

LGBT ROOTS INFORM THIS ANNUAL FOODIE FUNDRAISER FOR VICTORY PROGRAMS

On Sunday, April 24, over 200 guests are expected to attend the Dinnerfest RED Party + Auction at the swanky Back Bay restaurant Red Lantern. The event has emerged as the single largest annual fundraiser to support the multi-service non-profit organization Victory Programs, and it’s a major foodie draw. But it is also rooted in the story of much smaller gatherings that started nearly 30 years ago, and which exemplified the courage of a gay community that came together in the face of AIDS.

Since then, many things have changed. But the need to unite against an epidemic—whether it is illness, poverty or addiction—remains the same.

“It all began with a group of men who were losing their friends to AIDS,” says Shaunna Helton, a special events manager who helps steer the current Dinnerfest team. “They would come together around the dinner table to share stories, information and communication.” Helton is essentially describing the inception of the Boston Living Center, which was formally incorporated in 1986. It opened in its earliest incarnation at the YWCA building on Clarendon Street in Boston, as part of the Massachusetts Coalition for People with Disabilities; in 1985, it moved to its current location on Stachus Street (where it now nearly neighbors Red Lantern).

“The organization became a leader in care for the community, eventually emerging as the largest peer-led organization for people with HIV/AIDS in New England. Free of charge, the BLC offers daily meals, holistic care, classes, workshops and other services to a membership of thousands. And the BLC is now just one of many programs operating within the larger Victory Programs organization.

Over the years, Dinnerfest emerged as an event that pays tribute to the BLC’s earliest days while performing as a successful fundraiser: Last year garnered a record-breaking $88,000 thanks to 75 restaurants—including longtime supporters like Aquitaine, Mistral and Grill 23—that donated dining packages for its elaborate silent auction. (The party also features passed hors d’oeuvres, cash bar, a raffle for JetBlue tickets, and more fun.) But Dinnerfest’s popularity has increased in tandem to the needs it must answer.

Recent cuts to SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and Social Security benefits have impacted members who now “simply do not have enough to survive,” says Helton. As those with HIV/AIDS live longer, healthier lives, the BLC has been supporting them with job training and workplace readiness opportunities—like the launch of its TLC Academy, a collection of computer classes, test prep programs, and other occupational initiatives. And it has partnered with BAGLY (the Boston Alliance of LGBTQ Youth), among other community stakeholders, on the POV Vibes Café, a monthly meet-up for HIV-positive young people and their allies.

There have been struggles, though, particularly back in 2011. That’s when the BLC was nearly forced to shut its doors after it was discovered that its then-executive director, Valerie Tashibetta, had embezzled more than $250,000. Without any interruption in service, the BLC was able to rapidly raise funds to cover the shortfall before relying on the support of Victory Programs.

S a community organizer and writer, I have a soft spot for places like this. You know, those places you come to and feel like you are part of something that is bigger than you. And for me, Dinnerfest is one of those places. It’s a place where people come together to support each other and to support the organizations that are doing great work.

Over the years, Dinnerfest has grown from a small event to a major fundraiser for the BLC. It has become a tradition for people to come together to support the work that the BLC and Victory Programs do. And it’s not just a fundraiser; it’s a celebration of the community that we have built.

I’m looking forward to attending Dinnerfest this year. I’m sure it will be a night filled with delicious food, wonderful people, and a sense of community. And I’m also looking forward to seeing what new and exciting things are planned for this year’s event.