



The Many Children of Dr. Jesse Peel

January 15, 2024 By [Mark S. King](#)

The students who hang out in the [Dr. Jesse R. Peel LGBTQ Center](#) of East Carolina University (ECU) are welcome guests in a dynamic, welcoming space. Among them are all manner of gender expression and burgeoning sexualities. You'll find them lazing on couches or typing at work tables in the colorful lobby area throughout the school year, discussing whatever topics capture the minds of Gen Z these days. Just above them, a portrait of their benefactor keeps a protective watch, even if his eyes might twinkle conspiratorially at any youthful shenanigans.

"I told them I wanted that LGBTQ center smack dab in the middle of the new student center building," Jesse Peel told me a year ago, as he proudly showed me around before I spoke at a World AIDS Day event. "I didn't want us to be hidden somewhere in the back of the building. I wanted these students to feel safe to be out and proud." Jesse's generous donation toward the new LGBTQ center didn't just emblazon it with his name. It ensured the LGBTQ Center was positioned exactly where he wanted it.

Those ECU students, blessed with a safe space that honors and nurtures them, represent the spiritual progeny of Dr. Jesse Peel. But make no mistake, there are many, many more.

Jesse Peel [died last month](#) at the age of 83. He was a fierce HIV/AIDS advocate and long-term survivor who spoke up early and forcefully about the health crisis, long before others had the courage, and was a founder of every major HIV agency in Atlanta. He supported and loved the performing arts. He maintained an active social calendar, usually in service of bringing together his enormously broad circle of friends.

But beyond his remarkable civic accomplishments, Jesse Peel was, at his core, a nurturing parental figure. He was a father with many children.

When Jesse and his late mother created a scholarship fund at ECU, they did it because the university was known for connecting recipients with their donors. For years, at theater performances or in the hallways of HIV organizations in Atlanta, Jesse could be spotted with a few scholarship students in tow, teaching them about AIDS history or the wondrous artistic offerings in the city.

And then there were the slightly older children of Jesse Peel, the hoards of young gay men to whom he offered life advice, titillating gossip and harmless flirtation. They included emerging queer activists, gay chorus members, HIV/AIDS advocates, and the swarm of guys at his weekend pool parties, where Jesse could be found under an umbrella, holding court while working the New

York Times crossword puzzle.

“It’s a tonic for me,” Jesse once told me for [a Positively Aware Magazine interview](#). “I came out late in life, so my gay friends have always been younger. And people don’t think about the benefits of cross-generational friendships. Having vital people in my life means I have someone to call if I need help.”

It has been Jesse’s help, often in times of crisis, that countless people in Atlanta will remember. He has provided wise and loving counsel to executive directors of HIV agencies and to heartbroken gay men dealing with loss. He expertly walked a line between gay pal permissiveness and a fatherly stewardship, cautioning his young friends on our more perilous behaviors, sexual and otherwise.

When I was once arrested for drug possession during a woefully self-destructive time in my life, Jesse Peel was the person I called from Fulton County Jail. Within hours I had my freedom and a lawyer, thanks to Jesse. He also gave me the phone numbers of people he knew in recovery along with a very serious conversation about addiction among gay men.

That talk happened in his living room, the first place I ventured after my arrest. I knew there was nothing but safety to be found there. When I arrived, before there would be any stern lectures, Jesse Peel opened his arms to me for a long, loving embrace.

Because that is what good fathers do.

Mark

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