



## **Rev. Carol West named Kuchling Award winner**

by Tammye Nash  
The Dallas Voice

"We're all in this together," the Rev. Carol West, pastor of Celebration Community Church in Fort Worth, declared this week. "I'm a very big believer in community, whether the community is in Fort Worth or Dallas or Gun Barrel City or wherever. It's all about community."

And this week, the community that West has spent the last 24 years working to help recognized her efforts as the co-chairs of the 2010 Black Tie Dinner announced that West has been named as the recipient of the dinner's Kuchling Humanitarian Award.

"It's just a tremendous honor," West said Tuesday, May 25, speaking by cell phone from Cedar Creek Lake where she was vacationing.

"I knew Ray Kuchling [the man who was the first recipient of the award and for whom it is named]. I've known all the recipients through the years and have worked with them, and it is an honor to be in their company," she said. "I was pretty surprised."

In a statement released by BTDD, West said that the "common thread that runs through all these

great and wonderful people [the past recipients] is that every one of them has worked selflessly and has lifted others up on their shoulders.

BTDD Co-Chair Ron Guillard said West has earned her place on that list.

"It will be an honor to present the prestigious Kuchling Humanitarian Award to [West] this fall. [She] has embraced the GLBT community in Dallas-Fort Worth, and the community has embraced her.

"So many times, Carol has stepped in and provided much-needed help when no one else was willing. Countless times she has been there to speak for us, to counsel us, to comfort us, to laugh with us," Guillard said.

West started her professional life in the field of education, spending 17 years as a high school English teacher in Irving. But, she said, "I was leading a double life. I was closeted.

"I loved teaching, and I loved my students. But I knew I was called to the ministry.

And I knew I couldn't do both," she said. So she left teaching and went to work as executive director of a suicide prevention hotline in Tarrant County. Then in 1986, she began serving as a student clergy on the staff at Metropolitan Community Church of Dallas, the church now known as Cathedral of Hope and affiliated with the United Church of Christ.

West recalled that she started going to MCC Dallas "back in the early days, when AIDS had just come to Dallas, back when we still called it GRID, or Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. I just knew that this was the ministry I was called to. Don Eastman had just left. Steven Pace was the interim pastor, and he asked me to help out."

And so she did. And there was plenty of work to do. West was, in fact, one of the first AIDS chaplains to be funded by the state of Texas when she went to work at MCC.

"Back in those days, none of us knew much about this disease. There was a lot of fear, a lot of rumors and very little knowledge," West said. "Back then it wasn't uncommon for food trays to be left outside the doors of AIDS patients who were hospitalized. We would pick up those trays and feed the patients. The nurses weren't homophobic; they just didn't know much about this disease, and they were scared, understandably."

She also recalled how ambulance drivers would refuse to transport patients with AIDS, and many churches were unwilling to conduct funerals for the people who died of AIDS.

"It was a tough, scary time. But everyone pitched in to do what we could," West said of those early days. "I saw this community responding to a crisis, and I saw how empowered we all were when we all worked together. It did something to me. I had never seen that before, what people could do working together, and it did something to me."

West said that she enjoyed working for Cathedral of Hope, as the church had come to be known. But when she was offered the pastor's position at "a little church with 35 members," she couldn't turn it down.

"This was a congregation with 35 people. They didn't own the church where they worshipped. They'd never had a full-time pastor. They didn't know what to do, but they knew they were taking a huge step in hiring a full-time pastor."

That huge step paid off for the little church. Celebration Community Church now has about 500 members, and owns its own facilities, including a historic church building on Pennsylvania Avenue near downtown Fort Worth, and a building next door that houses a

counseling center.

And it paid off for West, too.

"I realized that I was also called to help build community in Fort Worth," she said. "We have worked very hard [at Celebration] at being a center of the community for all people - not just for people who attend our church, or people who are LGBT, but all people.

"Together, through God, we've built the largest LGBT church in Tarrant County. But more importantly, we've built a community where people love one another and truly care about each other."

But West's church- and community-building didn't stop with Fort Worth. In 2003, she said, she was approached by a group of four LGBT people who spent all or part of their time living in Gun Barrel City on Cedar Creek Lake, southeast of the Metroplex.

"These were people I knew, people I fished with. When I was growing up, my family had a place on Cedar Creek Lake, and I've always come back here to vacation and fish.

"But they came to me, and they said, 'Will you start a church down at Gun Barrel City?' I said, 'Well, I've already got a gig on Sundays.' But they said, 'We'll settle for Saturdays,'" she recalled. "So I talked to the board at Celebration about it, and they agreed, and I said I'd do it for six months."

As it ended up, West spent the next two-and-a-half years traveling to Gun Barrel City on Saturdays to conduct services at Celebration on the Lake Church. Then she'd head back to Fort Worth for Sunday services at Celebration Community Church.

Then Celebration on the Lake became its own separate church, and now West just goes to lake for R&R.

In the past year - since the June 29 raid by Fort Worth police and agents with the Texas Alcoholic Beverages Commission on the Rainbow Lounge - West has also been working with Fairness Fort Worth, the group formed to first help witnesses give statements about what happened during the raid and, since then, to work on improving relations between the city of Fort Worth and its LGBT community.

West called working with the new organization a "wonderful opportunity to ... meet so many people who do so much for the LGBT community in Tarrant County."

Looking back over her life so far, West said it's hard to choose any one moment as her most memorable. "There are just so many moments. You look back at your life and it's like watching a movie reel. You see so many moments that stand out as being special," she said.

"I was lucky," West continued. "I had a wonderful family that supported me in whatever I

did. I guess what I am most proud of is my family - the one I was born to and the extended family I have created, especially my partner of 23 years, Angela King. And the congregation [at Celebration Community Church]. They are my family, my blood.

"Wherever I have been, I have been supported. It's just so amazing what people can do when they work together," West said. "What we have in the Metroplex that is so special is that our men and our women work together. That doesn't happen everywhere, and we should be very pleased to have it. We are fortunate.

"It's been a good ride for me. I enjoy working with our community. I have seen a lot of changes," she said. "We have a long way to go, yes, but we've already come so far. And I am just overjoyed to have been a part of it. It's something I never dreamed I could do."

Black Tie Co-Chair Nan Arnold said that the LGBT community in North Texas has been fortunate that West was willing to follow her dreams and put her time and effort into the community.

"There's rarely an event in Dallas-Fort Worth where Carol West isn't present. Her connection with our community is strong and sincere," Arnold said. "Carol truly loves people - all people - and she has a stellar history of going above and beyond to lift people up and make all of us strong as a result.

"The Black Tie Dinner board of directors could not have chosen a person to better personify our 2010 theme, 'Stand Strong,'" Arnold said.

The 2010 Black Tie Dinner - the 29th annual - will be held Nov. 6 at the Sheraton Dallas Hotel.