

May 22, 1998

Remembering Jim Kepner

Barbara Gittings

This is the speech made by Barbara Gittings on May 22, 1998, in the Samuel Goldwyn Theater of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences at the memorial celebration of the life of veteran gay activist, historian, and archivist Jim Kepner.

My life partner Kay Lahusen and I were simply astonished when we first met Jim Kepner in 1963 at his home in Los Angeles. We saw books, *books*, BOOKS, and files, *files*, FILES, from floor to ceiling!

Jim and I clicked immediately. I too was a gay book buff, because in 1950 when I needed to learn about myself and what it meant to be gay, there was no one I could ask, so I instinctively turned to books.

Jim's library impressed us, but so did his dedication to activism, which we shared, and his passion for chronicling our movement.

The author George Eliot in her novel *Middlemarch* said, "The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts." I think of Jim's great legacy as those unhistoric acts, in the sense that his work wasn't headlined in the mainstream press, seldom even in gay/lesbian chronicles.

Jim was a sweet and low-key person who kept on plugging at his dream, never abandoning it, always tending it. The notion of burn-out wasn't in his cosmos. And even when his health faltered, Jim didn't.

Jim put his time and energy and what little money he had into creating a better life for all of us, and he took the change he created as its own reward.

To Kay and me, Jim seemed self-effacing in many ways. In 1983, the gay group in the American Library Association put on a program at the annual librarians' conference called "Why Keep All Those Posters, Buttons and Papers?" Jim Kepner was one of our speakers.

I needed publicity photos of the flier to promote the event. Jim didn't have a publicity photo. The picture he sent was a tiny snapshot and in the picture Jim is, appropriately, submerged in papers.

The last time I saw Jim wasn't a gay movement event. I was visiting in Los Angeles, and Jim took me to the Huntington Library and Botanical Gar-

dens. Naturally we oohed and aaahed over the exotic rare books and manuscripts, but Jim also proved an enthusiastic guide to the specialty gardens around the library. A man of many interests and wide knowledge.

What a legacy Jim has given us—worth having a hell of a celebration for! So here we are tonight, ancient activists and some newer ones, for a grand hurrah.

Jim, we love you, we honor you.