



Milwaukee LGBT History Project, Inc.

Joe Brehm 'This Is It' bar

Joseph Thomas Brehm (1942–2016; “Joe” to everyone) was the owner and manager of ‘This Is It’ bar for almost his entire adult life. The bar was opened by his mother June Brehm in 1968, who owned it and maintained a presence for most of her life. While not opened as a “gay bar,” the bar was friendly to all customers, and became a mecca for gay men when another nearby gay bar closed.

Over the years, Joe kept the bar exciting, and maintained a loyal following of old-timers as well as always attracting new blood. For most of the bar’s life known as an LGBT bar, the bar continued to be busy on evenings when other bars’ business lagged, in part because it was the only gay bar in the immediate downtown area (and thus easy for visitors staying in downtown hotels to get to) but also because of Joe’s presence and warmth with all his customers. Joe recognized the LGBT community was his main source of business, but he always kept an open door and welcomed the community at large, which made his bar popular to the general business community in the surrounding area as well.

Joe was also very community aware and a true activist. He was close friends with the owners of the *Wisconsin Light* newspaper, helping them computerize and use new technology for typesetting, layout, email, etc. Joe was also often the first in line to support community causes, hosting fundraising events for the Cream City Foundation, AIDS, and other worthy causes. He and ‘This Is It’ were a major sponsor of the PrideFest History Exhibit each year during his life.

Joe’s mother, June, passed away early in 2010, after which Joe controlled ownership of the bar. He continued to maintain a daily presence in managing the bar, and could be found in the bar early each day—until a diagnosis of Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a progressive neurodegenerative disease, began to restrict his mobility.

Late in 2015, Joe’s health went into decline. In mid-March 2016, Joe received a letter from U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin recognizing his and his mother’s vision and dedication. Then, March 31, 2016 was proclaimed “Joe Brehm Day” by Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett.

Joe passed away peacefully late in the afternoon on Sunday, April 3, 2016. He is survived by his wife of 47 years, two daughters, and other family. A Celebration of Life was held at ‘This Is It’ bar on Sunday, April 10, and hundreds of customers, plus friends and family, attended to share memories of Joe.