

JASMYN's Cindy Watson talks legacy in Jax ahead of retirement



JASMYN Founding CEO Cindy Watson

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Cindy Watson, one of the original board members and the first CEO of JASMYN, the Jacksonville Area Sexual Minority Youth Network, has recently announced she will retire on New Year's Eve after nearly 30 years of service.

She has played a pivotal role in transforming it from a small gathering that began at Willow Branch Library in 1994 into a substantial advocacy organization with a three-building campus and an annual outreach to almost 1,000 young individuals, with a multi-million-dollar budget.

On National Coming Out Day, Oct. 11, 1994, she signed the incorporation papers as the first CEO in her own living room. In 1998, she officially took on the position of executive director. Since then, JASMYN has seen remarkable growth, with the annual budget expanding from \$20,000 to over \$2 million; the organization has extended its reach to establish a three-building campus located in Jacksonville's Brooklyn neighborhood; and JASMYN has evolved its focus, addressing a wide range of issues affecting diverse LGBTQ+ youth, including mental and sexual health as well as homelessness, among other accomplishments.

The Business Journal recently interviewed Watson about her legacy, the current climate of LGBTQ rights in Jacksonville and what's next:

You have quite a legacy. How does it feel to leave it in someone else's hands?

Well, you know, this organization has had many years to build a very strong foundation. And there are hundreds of people who are true stakeholders who love the work of supporting LGBTQ young people and love Jasmine as an organization. The folks who rise to the top are the board members who are very, very strong and highly engaged and our professional staff, our C-suite team as well. So even though I'm stepping away, all those folks are still going to be there, and they are absolutely committed to the mission and to continuing to work and building on it and growing. So actually, I feel great about all of that. I feel like JASMYN has never been a stronger organization.

Can you talk about some of the changes you've witnessed in the past 30 years?

Well, the cultural climate in 1993 and 94 was a little bit hostile to what we were trying to do. Maybe I'm understating that, but young LGBTQ people were very much in the margins, the entire LGBT community was largely hidden. It was not safe. Adults lost their jobs and lost their families and lost their children. We knew that teenagers and young adults were the most vulnerable members of the population. So that's really why we said we got to start here. We got to really create that safe space for young people because we want them to come up in a way and with enough support so they can thrive. So there were lots of challenges: concerns about our safety, hard to find funding. And, from time to time, we were actually targeted. So a lot of that started to change in around 2014 and then improved further locally when the human rights ordinance passed and then when marriage equality passed. The community attitudes towards JASMYN and towards the LGBTQ community began to shift. A lot of mainstream folks started to say, 'Oh, this is a part of our community.' So that's the best, and one of the biggest changes is just how the community attitudes have shifted over time.

It seems to be cyclical, though. There is a lot of vitriol and hate aimed at the LGBTQ community, even by the State of Florida and Gov. Ron DeSantis recently. Can you talk a little bit about that? It seems like we are regressing.

Well, it feels that way. Actually, I think of it as a backlash, because the broader community's attitudes have shifted, and most people really do believe that LGBTQ people are an asset to the community and should be a part of it. Most people believe that in Jacksonville. And so that success has, in some ways, I think, attracted a backlash from folks who have always been there. They've always not wanted us to exist. And now, the backlash has grown and, of course, now it has institutional support from the legislature.... it is an active agent of the backlash, as is the state government. So that makes things hard, and especially hard for young people, because here are these, teens and very young adults who are just trying to be who they are and live their lives and be the best people they can be. And they get these constant messages in the media and in the culture, that they're not OK, there's something really bad and wrong with

them. That they shouldn't have their rights or shouldn't exist. They don't have a right to safe space in their schools anymore. It's troubling. But I think it's a backlash to our our progress. We just have to deal with it.

Despite the obvious issues, you seem pretty upbeat about things. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you seems to see this as a setback toward progress?

If you look at history, and Martin Luther King said this: 'The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.' And I hold that in my heart. I really believe that. I really believe in the goodness of humanity and people. I believe most people really care about other people. I don't believe this kind of backlash will be able to sustain itself because most people will come to a point where they just reject it. And they realize that it doesn't fully represent who they are and the kind of world they want to live in.

Switching topics to something a little bit more positive... What are some of the things you're most proud of during your tenure?

I'm really proud of the work we've done in building a strong community to support LGBTQ young people. That community came out in full force on Tuesday when we held our 17th annual coming out breakfast. We had over 600 people in the room ... that included corporate leaders. It included folks from all walks of life and included civic leaders. When we first started in 2007, we had 100 people in the room. Companies were a little bit concerned about coming out to support us. So there's a lot more folks who understand why it's important to support JASMYN. And beyond that... we have a really great campus that will sustain us into the future. We have acquired three buildings on a corner in Brooklyn. We've done extensive renovation. We're just finishing up with the last renovation project, and when we're done in six months or so, it's going to be a beautiful campus. That will be something that the city can be proud of, that this city supports LGBTQ young people in such a way that we have an actual space that says we care about you.

What's next for you?

I am going to take a little bit of a break. My partner and I like to travel, and I want to revisit hobbies that I started years ago that have fallen aside. I think I need that, but I won't be far away. I'm not leaving town. And I do expect to be engaged in other ways in that community. But I got to have a little rest first.
