

Charlotte, NC – January 9, 2008 – The Human Rights Campaign’s (HRC) Carolinas Gala committee has awarded the 2008 Equality Awards to Elke Kennedy of Greenville, S.C., and Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, and the 2008 Trailblazer Award to Rev. Dr. Bennie Colclough of Columbia, S.C. These recipients will receive their awards at the 13th Annual HRC Carolinas Gala on Saturday, February 16, 2008 at the Charlotte Convention Center. An attendance of more than 1,500 is expected.

“These awards are the only lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) recognitions truly meant to focus on the amazing efforts happening in the LGBT communities across the Carolinas,” said Tim Cable, 2008 HRC Carolinas Gala Awards committee chairman. “So many individuals and organizations in both states work tirelessly for tolerance, fairness and equality. Each year we have an open call for nominations to ensure we have individuals and organizations that reflect our diverse community and capture the many inspirational efforts demonstrated by all nominees. We are so proud of our 2008 award recipients.”

The 2008 HRC Carolinas Equality Award recognizes an outstanding individual and an organization that have furthered the progress of civil rights for LGBT persons.

Elke Kennedy is the founder of Sean's Last Wish Foundation, which was formed in May 2007, after her gay son, Sean, was killed in a hate crime, to raise awareness about hate crimes legislation and to combat prejudice and hate. Kennedy has lived in South Carolina with her family since 1985. While Sean’s death was investigated as a hate crime, South Carolina currently has no local hate crime laws. In Sean's memory, Elke Kennedy and her family established Sean's Last Wish Foundation. With her family, she has begun touring the state of South Carolina to talk about bias-motivated crimes and the need for legislation to address hate crimes.

The work of Kennedy and Sean’s Last Wish Foundation ties directly to the work of HRC over the past year as they campaigned in support of the Matthew Shepard Act, which passed Congress earlier this year. Kennedy and her family urged South Carolinians to join the national voices in seeking Federal protections in addition to the need for local laws. Sean’s Last Wish Foundation has organized vigils for Sean in Greenville, Charleston, and Columbia, along with ally organizations including Upstate Equality, South Carolina Equality Coalition, Faith in America, and S.C. Gay & Lesbian Pride Movement. Elke Kennedy has spoken at Atlanta Pride, Pride Charlotte and at the S.C. Pride Festival and Town Hall. She continues to share Sean’s story with thousands of South Carolina residents regardless of the cost or time. Kennedy also campaigns for organ donations since Sean’s gift saved five lives.

Myers Park Baptist Church, and its 1,970 congregants, took a courageous stand to be welcoming to openly gay men and lesbians, which resulted in the church’s expulsion from the North Carolina Baptist Convention. Last year, the Convention decided to expel any member church that openly accepts and affirms LGBT persons and same-sex relations from the Baptist community. After the expulsion, a Statement of Response was immediately posted on the Myers Park Baptist Church website and was read by the

church's senior pastor, The Reverend Dr. H. Stephen Shoemaker, on several newscasts. The statement professed that, "We will not allow our conscience to be coerced by (the Convention's) exclusionary conditions of membership, and we reaffirm Christ's welcome to all persons and our commitment to a ministry of reconciliation that seeks to be a healing witness in a world of divisions and hatreds and a part of God's dream to make all things one."

The Myers Park Baptist Church Board of Deacons decided that, rather than withdraw voluntarily from the Baptist State Convention, that they would – in the interest of being Christian advocates for all LGBT persons, in the interest of being a witness to Christ's welcome to all persons, and in the interest of social justice – to "out" Myers Park Baptist Church as one of those which is "welcoming and affirming to all persons, including gay and lesbian persons who wish to follow Christ with us, participate fully in our faith community and serve as leaders in our Church."

The 2008 HRC Carolinas Trailblazer Award recognizes an individual who has a consistent and significant list of contributions to the LGBT community and is seen as a role model to others.

The Reverend Dr. Bennie Colclough, currently the pastor of Providence Christian Church in Manning, S.C., has devoted much time and effort working as an advocate/straight ally for the South Carolina Equality Coalition (SCEC), S.C. Gay & Lesbian Pride Movement (SCGLPM), Faith In America and HRC. A native of Sumter, S.C., Dr. Colclough served in the United States Marine Corps for six years with a tour of duty in Vietnam, and is a graduate of Yale University Divinity School. He has actively participated in numerous town hall forums, vigils, press conferences, radio talk shows, etc., around the issues of discrimination, justice, equality, and religious bigotry. During the 2006 election year, Dr. Colclough worked tirelessly with SCEC to try and defeat Amendment One (which defined marriage in South Carolina as between man and woman only).

Last April, Reverend Colclough was one of two clergy persons from South Carolina that answered the Clergy Call for Justice by the HRC in Washington D.C. While in Washington, he visited and lobbied Congressmen from South Carolina about the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) and the Matthew Shepard Act. In September, he was a featured speaker at the S.C. Pride 2007 Town Hall: Equal Rights are Human Rights, sponsored by HRC, SCEC, American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the National Organization for Women (NOW).

Founded in 1980, HRC is America's largest civil rights organization working to achieve LGBT equality. HRC effectively lobbies Congress, provides campaign support to fair-minded candidates, and works to educate the public on a wide array of topics affecting LGBT Americans, including relationship recognition, workplace, family, and health issues. In addition, the HRC Foundation engages in extensive research and provides education and programming. HRC currently has more than 750,000 members, including more than 18,000 in the Carolinas.

HRC hosts annual fundraising Galas throughout the country to support its mission of building an America where LGBT people are ensured of their basic equal rights, and can be open, honest and safe at home, at work and in the community.