R.I.P. Butch McKay, a Transformative HIV Advocate and Ally in the South and Beyond

Through OASIS Florida and the Positive Living Conference, Butch McKay is remembered for service, humility and “endless Southern charm.”

February 19, 2026 By Eva Lorenz

Butch McKay, a longtime leader in the fight against HIV known for his gentleness and service to others, died peacefully in his sleep January 30 in Panama City Beach, Florida, reports OutSFL. He was 77.

“A monumental loss to the HIV community and to all those who value kindness and hard work,” wrote Mark S. King, fellow activist and author, in a Facebook Post. “His legacy is one of service, humility and endless Southern charm.”

McKay grew up in Fairfield, Alabama, and graduated from Auburn University with a degree in sociology. McKay first became involved in HIV and AIDS advocacy in 1994 while working on the HIV Vaccine Trials Network.

In an interview with the National AIDS Memorial’s “Surviving Voices” project, McKay recalled being a gay HIV-negative man in the early years of the epidemic and how the loss of a friend to AIDS inspired his future advocacy:

> “At the end of 1987, I learned that my best friend of 22 years had AIDS…. He said, ‘I know you wanna be there for me, and you can be there for me if you promise me something.’ And I said, ‘What’s that?’ He said, ‘Promise me that you’ll be there for at least one person living with AIDS that has no one.’ And I made that promise, not knowing how in the world I would keep it. And then he died the following January, and that would actually be the last time I would see him in person. …

> “Keeping that promise every day, that promise is just as real. I made it in ’88, and it still is real today to me. And I’m not going anywhere until I take my last breath and join my friends.”

McKay established the Positive Living Conference in 1997. At the three-day gathering, HIV-positive attendees learned about science, advocacy and self-care while building a stronger community. The conference is the largest U.S. gathering of people with HIV and is organized by the AIDS service organization OASIS Florida, where McKay was the executive director since 1996. This year’s event, slated for October 23 to 25, will mark the 28th Annual Positive Living Conference.

“That conference transformed lives. It gave meaning, purpose and hope to thousands of people across this nation,” wrote Jeremy Scott Hobbs, LGBTQ advocate and founder of Colgay Pride, in an Instagram post. “And Butch did all of this as a man who never contracted HIV himself. Yet he loved, supported and fought for people living with HIV and AIDS with a devotion that can only be described as sacred.”

View this post on Instagram

A post shared by THE AIDS MEMORIAL (@theaidsmemorial)

As executive director of OASIS Florida, McKay also founded annual retreats for HIV-positive and -negative queer men and women in North Florida and rural areas, known as ManREACH and WomanREACH, to further foster community building. He was a board member of the Southern

AIDS Coalition from 2008 on.

“He traveled to Africa on missions to deliver medical supplies and textbooks to families in rural Tanzania, was invited to the White House for the unveiling of the National HIV/AIDS Strategy and became a familiar presence at health care conferences across the country,” according to OutSFL.com,

“His love and care for all in the HIV community will be missed,” said Kathie M. Hiers, former AIDS Alabama CEO, in a Facebook comment. “His commitment to support others and his advocacy are hard to replace.”

OASIS Florida is holding a celebration of life at the Positive Living Conference on Friday October 23, 2026, which is open to the public. There will also be a virtual celebration of life on Saturday, February 28 to honor McKay’s lifetime of advocacy and hard work. Look for more information on both ceremonies on the OASIS Florida home page.

McKay is preceded in death by his husband, Darrel Quick. You can read McKay’s obituary on Everloved.com.

To read a 2019 essay by McKay in POZ, see “Messages of Love at New York City World Pride.”

Click here to read a final Q&A with McKay.

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