

By Diane Parkes

People from across the West Midlands will gather on World AIDS Day to celebrate the unveiling of a new monument and to take part in a church service of remembrance, reflection and hope.

The Birmingham AIDS and HIV Memorial (BAHM) in Hippodrome Square features two entwined six-metre-high red ribbon hearts and is in memory of people who have died from AIDS and people living with or affected by HIV.

The unveiling on 1 December will be preceded by a church service for people of all faiths and no faith at St Martin in the Bull Ring Church. It will feature readings, music, the lighting of candles and Birmingham Royal Ballet Principal Dancers Céline Gittens and Brandon Lawrence performing an excerpt from *The Nutcracker*.

The monument is the brainchild of local artist and businessman Garry Jones who was inspired by watching the television series *It's a Sin* which chronicled the emergence of AIDS in the 1980s through the experiences of a group of friends and lovers.

"I'm 62 now and back in 1981 I was 21 and I lived through the first moments of the HIV and AIDS pandemic," recalls Garry. "I watched friends die in horrible ways within a few weeks with no dignity and no funeral to remember them by.

"In January last year I was sitting watching *It's a Sin*, which was set in 1981, and it was like watching my life and all the people I lost. I thought 'I'm going to do something to remember those people'."

Garry, who has been involved in Birmingham World AIDS Day commemorations for more than a decade, drew some preliminary designs for the artwork and posted his ideas on social media – immediately attracting supporters. Together with Birmingham businessmen Andrew King and Phil Oldershaw, he launched the BAHM project which has successfully raised £210,000 for the memorial.

"The heart-shaped red ribbon represents two figures entwined as if embracing and supporting each other," Garry says. "They represent the dual identities of HIV and AIDS, the past and future, they symbolise the remembrance of those we have lost to AIDS while also celebrating those living with HIV now."

Garry tested positive for HIV in 2006 but manages the condition with medication.

"I'm so grateful for the NHS and the fact we can access antiretroviral treatment in the UK. I'm alive and I want to celebrate it. Seeing this project actually happen is like a dream come true, I keep pinching myself to make sure it's real.

"But around the world there are still thousands of people dying, particularly in Africa and even in America if they don't have insurance. HIV doesn't kill you if you have effective antiretroviral treatment but too many people in the world don't have access to those drugs.

"The sculpture will also act as a reminder of the work that's still to be done to end the stigma and discrimination."

Remembrance and reflection lie at the heart of the church service says the Rev Jeremy Allcock, Rector of St Martin in the Bull Ring.

“This is a chance for the church to stand in unity and solidarity with all those who are suffering and also those who want to try and do something positive about this illness in the world,” he explains. “It is an opportunity for the people and communities of the West Midlands of different faiths, or no faith, to gather to remember, celebrate and hope.

“It’s an opportunity to remember all those who have died through this illness. For some people that will be a very personal reflection because there will be people they have known who have been really important to them who have lost their lives. For others this is a general recognition.

“There is a component of celebration because there have been incredible medical advances which have made an enormous difference for many people’s lives and it will mean there are a lot of people who are now able to live with HIV without the threat of dying from AIDS. It’s about celebrating the advances that have been made and giving thanks for that.”

But the service will also reflect on steps still needed to end discrimination.

“Alongside that celebration is a recognition that those medical advances are not available to very large numbers of people who are suffering from this illness,” says Rev Allcock. “We need to hope for a world where these medical advances become available in other parts of the world and even in some communities in the UK.

“And there is a sense of hopefulness of seeing that, with changes and with greater access to medications, we could even potentially eradicate the illness. This is very much something we want to reflect on. Do we have a hope and, for people of faith do we have a hope in our faith, that this could be something we could eradicate from the world?”

The service will feature readings and thoughts from a range of faith traditions, music and readings, and will offer everyone a moment for reflection in the act of lighting a candle.

“The key component will be the opportunity for everybody to come forward and light a candle which will be a way for them to offer their own thoughts or their own prayers. That may be specifically for someone they have known, loved and lost or it may be in a general act of acknowledgement and remembrance of all those lost or it might be lighting a candle in the hope that one day we will make this an illness of the past or an illness which doesn’t lead to death.”

BRB Principal Dancers Céline Gittens and Brandon Lawrence will perform an excerpt from *The Nutcracker* and BRB Chief Operating Officer Anna Williams says the company has been keen to be involved with the memorial and the service.

“The monument is a really positive step for Birmingham and the UK, and both BRB and our colleagues at Birmingham Hippodrome wanted to demonstrate our support of this important initiative,” she says. “While these days the disease is largely controllable in the UK, we are very much aware that in other parts of the world AIDS is still devastating lives.

“Therefore we wanted to work with the amazing BAHM team to draw attention to that fact and to give the wider Birmingham community an opportunity for reflecting on it in the relative tranquility of St Martin in the Bull Ring, just before the unveiling outside Birmingham Hippodrome.

“By being involved in the service with a dance performance we are publicly demonstrating BRB’s vote of confidence and affirming that we are very much at the heart of this initiative. We hope that

our audience attending *The Nutcracker* that evening will visit the memorial and reflect as they leave Birmingham Hippodrome.”

The *Remember, Celebrate, Hope* church service takes place at St Martin in the Bull Ring on 1 December at 4.30pm followed by the unveiling of the BAHM in Hippodrome Square, Hurst Street at 6pm. For full information see <https://bahm.co.uk/>