

IN FOCUS CHARLOTTE

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Challenge and Change in LGBT Charlotte

Local LGBT groups, businesses move forward amid transformed culture

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CHARLOTTE — Last month, the LGBT community witnessed history. One of the last remaining vestiges of federal anti-LGBT discrimination was wiped away when the Supreme Court struck down a portion of the *Defense of Marriage Act*. The ruling, while not perfect, removes yet another hurdle from full federal LGBT equality. The historic change came about on the anniversary of yet another historic event, the *Lawrence v. Texas* decision striking down anti-gay crime against nature laws.

The 10 years between *Lawrence* and this year's pair of pro-LGBT Supreme Court rulings are no ordinary decade. The world today has been transformed — legally, socially, religious, technologically and more.

Some leaders in Charlotte's LGBT community say those changes have brought both positive growth and challenges.

"If you go back 10 years, or even seven or eight, back then the only place an LGBT person could really go was to gay bars and to have a community center was a necessity for them to have a place to rally around and get to know people and be comfortable and safe," says Roberta Dunn, vice-chair of the LGBT Community Center of Charlotte.

Ten years ago, the Charlotte center was just two years old. The internet was still young and LGBT resources were sometimes hard to access. Mass online socializing was a new concept; Myspace had just been born and Facebook would come just one year later.

"When I was coming out, everything just seemed to be self-discovery," says Glenn Griffin, the Charlotte center's operations director. "You could go to the clubs or visit Stonewall in New York City. That was all I could find."

Things today, are different, Griffin says. "Things have gotten much more out in the open," he says. The internet — perhaps the most transformative communication tool in the history of humanity — has played a significant role.

"You can go online now and find any answer you want or find 10,000 answers," he says, noting the ease of access doesn't necessarily solve all LGBT resource challenges.

"At the same time," Griffin adds, "you're still alone. At the center, what we are striving to do is have groups and a community come together."

Jim Yarbrough, who owns and publishes this newspaper, says he, too, has experienced the powerful changes of the last decade. His *White Rabbit*, which sells books, magazines, Pride-wear, clothing, novelties and other items, hasn't been immune to the changes.

"I think that LGBT bookstores as a rule have struggled a lot over the past 10 years, because our community has become a lot more mainstreamed," he says.

Online book retailers have cut into print publishing profits. Large booksellers are more likely to carry LGBT titles.

Like the center, which finds itself adapting to new needs, Yarbrough says that *White Rabbit* is moving forward.

"I think it's important to make changes and to stay up with the times, changing merchandise, changing your look, but that's with any retail business," he says.

But, in a time where LGBT resources and products are available at the click of a mouse, are groups like LGBT community centers and LGBT-themed stores, and even newspapers, still relevant?



Out in the open: Charlotte's LGBT community has changed and become more outspoken over the past 10 years. Still challenges remain, and leaders say they are being faced, for groups like the LGBT Community Center of Charlotte and businesses like *White Rabbit* (pictured).

Dunn, Griffin and Yarbrough all say yes. "I think the LGBT store, not necessarily a bookstore, still serves the community with a variety of merchandise that they can't find anywhere else or, at least, is harder to find anywhere else," Yarbrough says. "They can feel comfortable coming here to buy. Some people are still not out or still aren't comfortable."

Dunn and Griffin say the center is fulfilling needs that didn't exist a decade ago.

"Our Gay & Gray group," says Griffin. "Before, you never would have heard of

something like that. That group of people is now older and they are out and they need resources."

The center, says Dunn, will remain a central community resource.

"We have to really change operations and outreach, but we are still the focal point for LGBT people," she says. "You look at the list of events the center holds — it's a page full."

Dunn adds, "It's just the comfort and relaxation of going in and being around folks just like you." ::



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