

LGBTQIA Businesses in NC are Open



Diane Groff of Durham is a lesbian and co-owner at the Other End of the Leash, a pet boutique with an in-store bakery.

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North Carolina, like the United States at large, has gone through an unprecedented change in the past decades when it comes to attitudes toward people who identify as LGBTQIA. But like the spread of acceptance in the United States, North Carolina has not been affected evenly.

In cities like Chapel Hill and Carrboro, openly gay and lesbian officials are elected to high office. And yet, 61 percent of state voters supported a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage.

Public officials like North Carolina Attorney General Roy Cooper are no longer supporting or enforcing laws that discriminate against the LGBTQIA community. But gay-straight alliances in public high schools, even in places like Orange County, are still being blocked or shut down.

Just as attitudes across North Carolina vary from place to place when it comes to the LGBTQIA community, so do attitudes toward businesses that are LGBTQIA-run or LGBTQIA-friendly.

Diane Groff, co-owner of the Other End of the Leash in Durham said she hasn't faced many challenges for being gay.

"In Durham we've had nothing but unbelievable welcome from both gay and straight people," Groff said. "We haven't seen any chal-

lenges, besides the ones we face as small business owners."

Similarly, Sharon Collins is the co-owner of Balloons and Tunes, a party store and specialty balloon provider in Carrboro. Collins is openly gay and runs Balloons and Tunes with her partner.

"We have not found that our identity as lesbians has been an issue at all in our business. I've never once had a negative experience because of that," Collins said. "We find that the thing that makes our business successful for as many years as we've been successful is that we have a product that people want. We offer service that is exceptional and people keep coming back."

Collins said anti-LGBTQIA attitudes exist in North Carolina but attributed the lack of negativity regarding her sexual orientation to her store's location.

"There's always, to me, a small subgroup of people who are prejudiced and, in my opinion closed-minded. There's always going to be that vocal minority who gets a lot of attention," she said. "But especially in the Triangle and Chapel Hill/ Carrboro area where I am, it's a very inclusive community."

In contrast, there's Replacements, Ltd., whose showroom and main headquarters are located in McLeansville, about 20 minutes west of Burlington. Replacements is the world's largest provider of china and silverware and carries complete sets of various designs, al-

lowing customers to "replace" a piece they may be missing.

Bob Page is CEO and founder of Replacements. Not only is Page openly gay, but he donated money to fight North Carolina's Amendment One and used Replacement's various electronic billboards to host anti-Amendment One ads.

"My partner and I have been together for nearly 40 years and we've adopted two sons. There are so many families like us in the state that deserve to be treated with respect under the law," Page said.

Page's open support made Replacements a singular voice among large corporations in North Carolina and the business got letters from customers saying how upset they were by the company's position and that they would never buy from Replacements again. Some forms of protest got closer than just letters, like anti-gay graffiti on part of the company's property.

"There was one woman who drove her truck to Replacements and had it parked to block the entrance," he said. "No one was hurt and she was gone by the time the police came, but for about 30 minutes, no one could get in to the store."

Businesses and history

Businesses run by openly LGBTQIA operators are relatively new in the United States.

Mary Jo Festle, the Maude Sharpe Powell professor of history at Elon University, said this didn't really start until the Stonewall Riots in 1969.

"Before, there would be businesses in the West that would be on the down-low, but people in the area would know," Festle said.

After Stonewall, there was a rise in bars, athletic teams, concert areas and especially bookstores that were run by openly LGBTQIA people instead of closeted ones. Those businesses relied on the LGBTQIA community as a consumer base and would try to provide services others could not.

"There would be bookstores that would have a tiny gay section in the back and then there would be bookstores where it would be obvious the minute you walk in that it's catering to the LGBTQIA community," Festle said. "Anyone in the neighborhood would know about it, but they'd also know who walks in, and you'd need customers who had the nerve to be seen walking in."

In this same vein, Collins said her openness about her identity has drawn business from other members of the LGBTQIA community.

"I think that on a small level, some people call on us because they know that we are gay and lesbian-owned," she said. "We do events for gay pride. And I think that there is a loyalty in the community so that, when given the alternative, you choose someone you want to support. And hopefully members of the LGBTQIA community choose us."

For owners like Page, running a business where they are free to openly identify as LGBTQIA has other benefits.

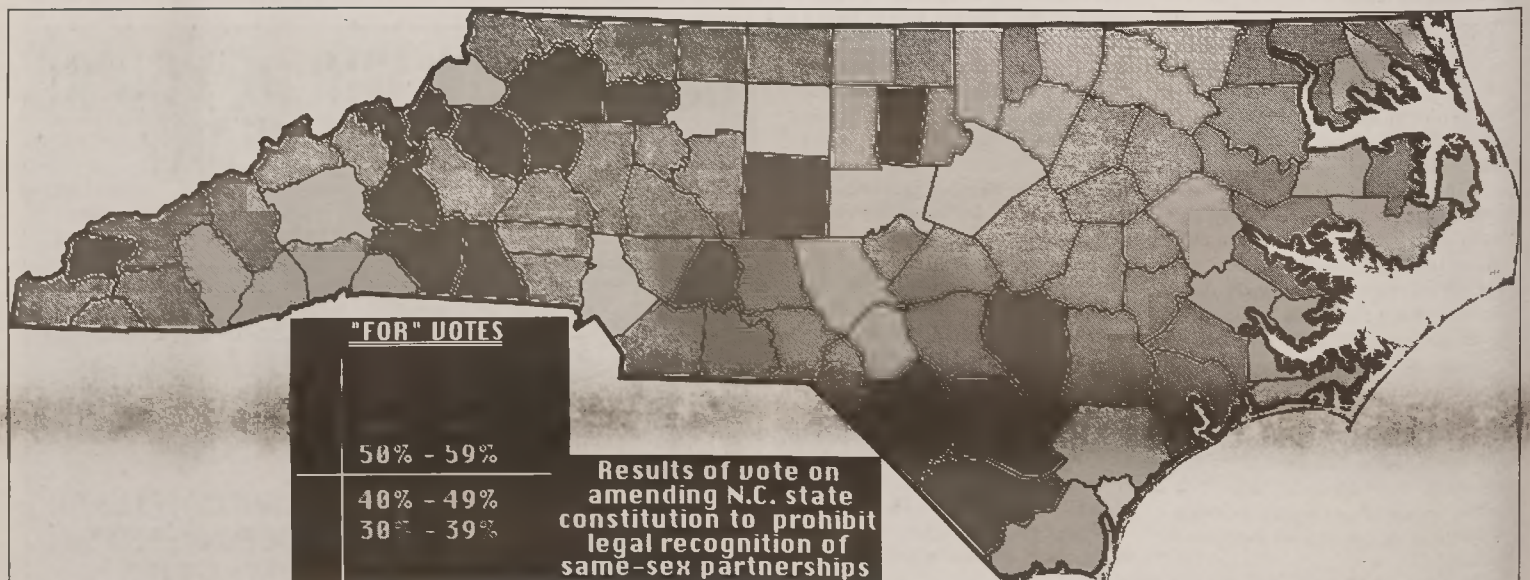
"We have many wonderful employees who are openly LGBTQIA, and I want them to not feel uncomfortable while they're here and feel like they can be themselves," he said.

In the South, the growth of LGBTQIA-owned businesses is much smaller compared to places like New York City and San Francisco. Festle said not only is the South generally more conservative as a result of the patriarchal society set up through slavery, but Southern states also have smaller cities.

"Big cities tend to have more diversity and more space for differences," she said. "It's not surprising that the South would have fewer LGBTQIA businesses and less of a community."

Page attributed part of North Carolina's lack of openly-LGBTQIA business, compared to northern and western states, to religious extremism and what he described as the "hate speech" that comes with it.

"It doesn't seem very Christian to me," he



A map of North Carolina details which counties voted for or against Amendment One, which constitutionally banned same-sex marriage in North Carolina when it passed in 2012.

Graphic courtesy of Wikimedia user Skylarstrickland