PRIDE IN PLACE

AT 25, LI'S LGBT NETWORK HAS BUILT A COMMUNITY TO SUPPORT AND INSPIRE THE NEXT GENERATION

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In June of this year, a rainbow flag raised at Hempstead Town Hall ushered in Pride on the Beach, a three-day festival that would bring thousands to Long Beach to celebrate lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Such a gathering would have been unthinkable to most, if not all, members of the local LGBT community 27 years ago, when Long Island’s first gay pride march stepped off in Huntington only after a hearing in federal court to obtain the permit.

Though this reality — one that includes federal marriage equality for same-sex couples — may be a given among millennials and Gen Z, its foundation has been painstakingly built by the previous generation. On Long Island, that generation has included David Kilmnick, 51, whose LGBT Network and its first major initiative, Long Island Gay and Lesbian Youth, in 2018 celebrates 25 years of service. The network has been a lifeline for Zachary Reyes, 21, of Huntington Station, who spoke in November at the group’s Transgender Day of Remembrance ceremony in Bay Shore. TDOR events, which got their start in 1999 in San Francisco, memorialize those who have died because of anti-transgender violence.

“LIGALY has been a place of...”
They afford me the opportunity to have one-on-one sessions with a social worker . . . where you can be yourself and there’s no judgment.”

— Rona Sinz, 58, of Holbrook
annual LGBT Prom, which drew more than 300 teens this year.

“So many gay kids feel that they can’t do what they want because of who they love,” said Kilmnick, of Centereach.

But at the centers, in Woodbury, Bay Shore, Sag Harbor and Long Island City, Queens, they soon learn that “there’s nothing more freeing than to be yourself,” Kilmnick said on a recent afternoon at the network’s Woodbury offices.

Kilmnick, a genial man with piercing blue eyes, took a visitor on a tour of office hallways decorated with “Coming Out Day” posters designed by Long Island youngsters and news clippings of major events in the organization’s history.

The tour ended in a meeting room where photos of LIGALY alumni hang next to a full-size rainbow flag.

“These kids were all able to express themselves, to use their talents and be leaders, and they’ve gone on to pursue their dreams, comfortable in their own skin,” Kilmnick said. “They were allowed to be their authentic selves and enjoy life despite the challenges in society.”

In the past quarter-century much has changed for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people on Long Island — and in the nation. Indeed, in 2017 the Pew Research Center reported, “Two years after the Supreme Court decision that required states to recognize same-sex marriages nationwide, support for allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally is at its highest point in over 20 years of Pew Research Center polling on the issue.” The research center found that by a ratio of nearly 2 to 1, more Americans say they favor allowing gays and lesbians to marry.

The progress we’ve made over time just brings hope to every generation of trans people and the LGBT community in general.”

— Devyn Egan, 18, of Coram

Kilmnick said that with its recent expansion into Queens, his organization is now “the largest regional network of LGBT services in New York State in terms of geography and population served.”

Local LGBT activists credit the centers with providing a safe space, especially for people without other healthy social outlets.

“I feel strongly that these community centers are really lifesaving,” said Nicole Grodner, 36, of Bethpage, a union representative, who has visited the Bay Shore center and attends the LGBT Network-sponsored Pride on the Beach with her partner of 13 years.

“For people who feel like they don’t belong anywhere, that open door gives them a place where they can feel comfortable and a part of...
something,” Grodner said. “The work that he’s doing is really important,” agreed Maura Spery, 59, of Mastic Beach, who moved to Long Island in 2002 with her partner, Nancy Sorkow, 60, a social worker.

As a sign of progress, Spery said, her sexual orientation wasn’t an issue in 2014, when she won an election for Mastic Beach village trustee. She went on to be elected mayor in 2015, serving until the village was absorbed last year by Brookhaven Town.

But LGBT Long Islanders also acknowledge the challenges likely ahead, especially for transgender people, many of whom worry their rights may be endangered by changing federal policies.

Gregory Noone, 56, of Ronkonkoma, a former Long Island ACT UP activist who has participated in network programs, said the community needs to be wary of complacency. “The biggest challenge is we should not take things for granted,” said Noone, program manager for Thursday’s Child, a Patchogue-based nonprofit serving people living with HIV and AIDS.

“We live in a little bubble here on Long Island,” said Noone, who married James Gale, 55, a bank manager, in 2006 in Toronto. “Even though we have marriage equality, it can be changed. A good chunk of the country thinks it’s OK to allow people to be fired just because they’re gay. It’s [discrimination] still legal in more...
Milestone for LGBT Network

COVER STORY from E6

than half of the states.”

Same-sex marriage was practically unimaginable, and LGBT life vastly different, when Kilmnick was growing up in Far Rockaway, Queens. “I knew I was gay as far back as I can remember,” Kilmnick said. “When I was 5 or 6, when people were talking about being attracted to the opposite sex, I knew I was attracted to the same sex — but I knew enough not to talk about it.”

Kilmnick learned about community organizing from his grandmother Helen Leonescu, a Democratic leader in Far Rockaway with whom his family shared a two-family house.

Kilmnick graduated from Far Rockaway High School in 1984 and earned a bachelor’s degree in public relations from LIU Post in Brookville, where he was elected student body president.

HOW IT STARTED

The idea for LIGALY grew out of a project to complete a master’s degree in social work at Stony Brook University. “I decided to create a curriculum to talk about what it was like to grow up gay, particularly in the suburbs in an isolated area like Long Island,” Kilmnick said.

For his research, Kilmnick contacted area schools and asked to make a presentation. Some districts said they had no LGBT students. But a few accepted, leading Kilmnick to believe he was on the right track.

“No matter where I did this workshop, a couple of students would struggle behind, shuffle their papers and ask a question: Is there any place I can go to meet other people like myself?”

LIGALY started with a half-dozen school districts, including East Hampton and Uniondale. Nowadays, Kilmnick said, the LGBT Network provides workshops or speakers in 110 of Long Island’s 125 public school districts, reaching tens of thousands of students a year. About 4,000 youths currently attend LGBT Network programs.

In 2006, the organization expanded to include “life-span” services for the LGBT community, Kilmnick said. A newer program is SAGE-LI, a social group for older adults. The network also continues to expand its educational programs, which include transgender awareness among about two dozen workshops offered to student leaders, Nassau and Suffolk police academies and other audiences.

The network has also been credited with a number of firsts: the Gay Parent Teacher Student Association it launched in 2012, and a Major League team Pride Night with the New York Mets in 2015.

With 50 staff members, the LGBT Network has a $5.6-million annual budget, about two-thirds funded by state and local government grants. The balance comes from fundraisers.

Among LIGALY alumni, James Quinn credits the group with saving his life.

“It wasn’t for LIGALY, I don’t think I’d be alive today,” said Quinn, a Northport High School graduate who was 14 when he showed up at a LIGALY meeting, feeling alone and isolated.

“It [LIGALY] showed me that I wasn’t alone and that there wasn’t anything wrong with me, that I was perfectly normal and there were other kids just like me,” said the East Northport native who is the owner of an event production company in Washington, D.C., and an associate producer of this year’s March for Our Lives, the student-led demonstrations in support of tightening gun control.

WHITE HOUSE CONNECTION

Quinn, 31, who moved off Long Island in 2005 to attend college, has kept in touch with Kilmnick and the LGBT Network. Six years ago, when he was working in the Obama administration’s Office of Scheduling and Advance, Quinn arranged for Vice President Joe Biden to send a copy of “The White House Cookbook,” with a handwritten note, as a wedding gift when Kilmnick married his life partner, Robert Vitelli, in 2012 at Land’s End catering hall in Sayville.

“I wish you the very best and I am proud to stand with both of you,” says the note Kilmnick has kept as a memento.

Biden didn’t attend the wedding, which was held the same weekend as the Democratic National Convention where he was nominated for a second term. But the vice presidential acknowledgment attests to Kilmnick as a rising national LGBT figure. Kilmnick went on to serve on Hillary Clinton’s statewide leadership committee during her 2016 presidential campaign.

In addition to working to improve LGBT life in the “now,” Kilmnick lists priorities for the next several years: opening five new LGBT centers on Long Island by 2020; building affordable housing for LGBT seniors, people living with HIV and/or AIDS and homeless youths; and training LGBT youths to enter the workforce.

“Everyone should feel free to come out and be themselves,” Kilmnick adds. “When it comes down to social justice and civil rights, equality needs to be afforded to all.”

For Reyes, the network and LIGALY have been both a support and an inspiration. LIGALY helps trans people “to keep living as we are, without anyone telling us what or who to be,” Reyes said, adding, “I’m happy to have a platform to speak on these issues and preach love to anyone who’s going to hear me.”