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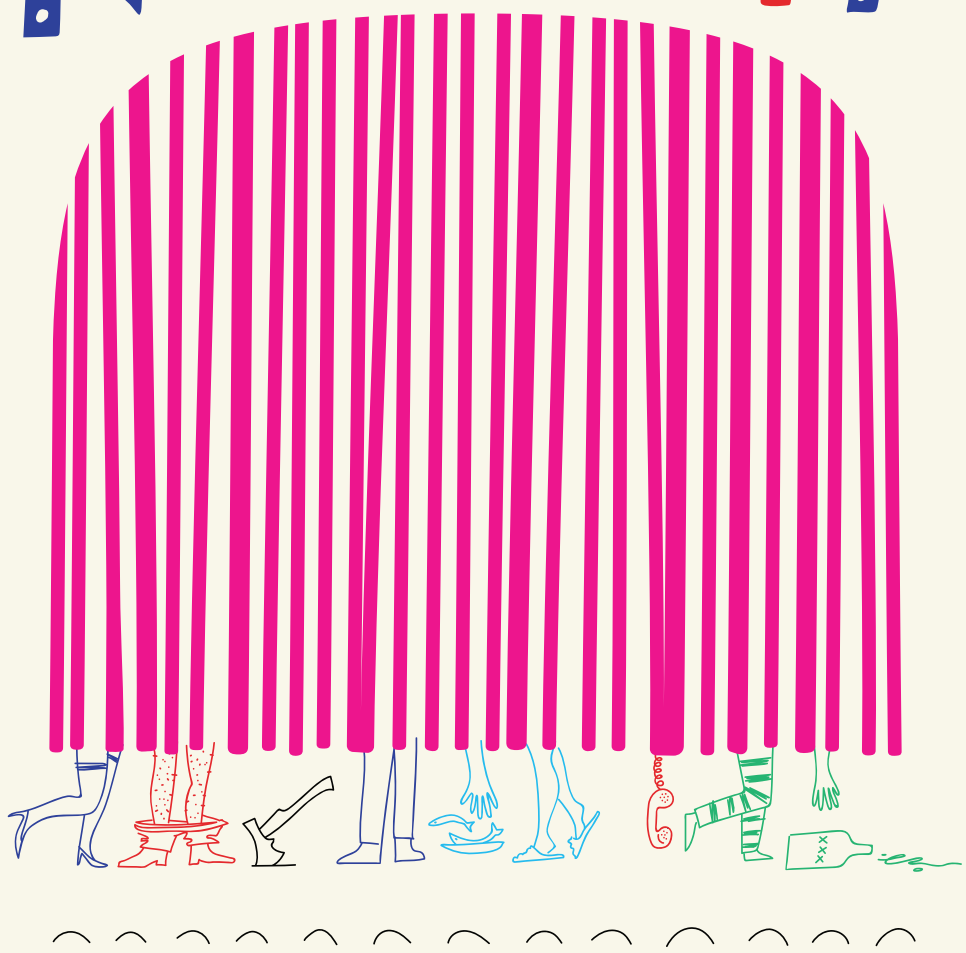
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SAN DIEGO PRIDE

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UPTOWN NEWS DOWNTOWN NEWS

Welcome to the 2025 Pride Guide!

By DREW SITTON / Times of San Diego

San Diego Pride is huge.

Hundreds of thousands flood the streets to cheer on a parade which lasts hours with countless contingents (okay someone is probably counting but it's not me).

The parade is the largest single-day civic event in the city, rivaled only by the two-day Balboa Park December Nights.

The festival is a playground of activities and concerts in Balboa Park, including at the revived electronic music stage. It also provides opportunities to meet artists, social groups and organizations in the community.

The headliners Kehlani and Kim Petras are the biggest in years, with a Grammy nom and win respectively. But the lack of Jewish organizations at the festival will be felt amid boycotts over Kehlani for anti-Israel comments.

Despite any internal conflicts, the exuberance of the crowd at the parade always has an infectious energy. During national attacks on LGBTQ+ rights, seeing so much support will be encouraging—even if it means wading through a slew of people.

Amid the spectacle, I've heard people complain about the advocacy of Pride being lost. I think they just need to look for it.

This year's Champion of Pride, Courtney "Strawberry" Johnson, said, "A lot of people see Pride nowadays as a celebration to just walk around half naked and X, Y and Z and stuff like that. But for me, Pride is a year round thing." She feels it while fundraising for the community, embodying the spirit of trancestors like Marsha P. Johnson.

With its reputation as a gayborhood, marching in Hillcrest is far from radical, despite a few loud naysayers behind police lines. As people search out the meaning of Pride, plenty have turned to their local communities.

While LGBTQ+ people have always been in conservative areas like North and East County, they have not always been accepted.

A Pride march in Ramona raised the visibility of queer people even in rural communities. Pride by the Beach, held in Oceanside, was a way for North County LGBTQ+ people to gather.

One of the funniest moments I witnessed this year occurred in Santee, cough Klantee cough, when someone shouted out their car window "Go to f***ing church!" at marchers. Ironically, Santee Pride is sponsored by the local Methodist church, so as the march headed towards the small festival in its parking lot, we were quite literally going to church. Little did they know.

To the south, drag performers like Aang Xiety, who tenderly shared his fight with cancer on page 7, crossed the border to Tijuana Pride where LGBTQ+ people are far less accepted.

Other specialized Pride celebrations also occurred to the south, like Sober Pride where people gathered in Barrio Logan for a fun day of dance lessons, tea and drag performances without any substances.

None rivaled the numbers to land in Hillcrest next week yet raised anticipation for one unifying regional event in Hillcrest, which we delve into in this Pride Guide.

This is the sixth year I've created this Pride Guide with a team of photographers, designers, writers and sales people (Mike R., find so much joy in your next endeavor).

This print edition serves as an event guide. We have roundups from food critic Frank Sabatini Jr. on new queer-friendly restaurants to try (page 17), and got queer authors Becca Title and Lauren Marie Fleming to share their favorite books of the year (page 16).

Plus, the guide highlights local LGBTQ+ luminaries. I love sharing about stalwart advocates like the Spirit of Stonewall award winners (page 22) and Assemblymember Chris Ward (page 9). Seeing the tremendous work of visual artists like German Rojas, Andrea Mapula (page 13) and Carole Kuck (page 8) moves me.

I love meeting local LGBTQ+ leaders and hearing about the issues facing the community. Like Pride itself, it's a place of joy as well as advocacy.

I'm not even an editor anymore and I found a way to get back in the editor's chair just for this!

Thank you so much for supporting our work, now under new ownership from NEWSWELL.

If you want to know where to get started, learn about San Diego's long history of drag kings who are so often overlooked on page 19 with gorgeous photography from Brittany Cruz-Fejeran.

Otherwise, the practical information like festival schedule, the updated parade map while construction continues on Normal Street and events calendar can be found on pages 14 and 15.

Want to go deeper? Hard news coverage of the Kehlani controversy, the Pride military department dropping out of the parade, an open letter from past volunteers questioning the Pride board and other topics can be found on our website at TimesofSanDiego.com.



An East County resident rollerskated through the Santee Pride walk with a cat in a backpack. Here, the pair enjoys the festival at Santee United Methodist Church on May 31, 2025. (PHOTO BY DREW SITTON/TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)



One of innumerable floats at the San Diego Pride Parade on July 20, 2024. (PHOTO BY DREW SITTON/TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)



A Pride march in Romona on June 14, 2025 raises the visibility of LGBTQ+ people and allies who already exist in rural communities. (PHOTO BY DREW SITTON/TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)

CANCER *is a* DRAG

Rising star Aang Xiety performs amid stage 4 cancer treatment

By DREW SITTON / Times of San Diego

CHULA VISTA – You might think a jam-packed Pride season would cause stress for someone named Aang Xiety.

The up-and-coming drag performer rode last month on a float in the Tijuana Pride Parade, produced shows on both sides of the border and will be co-hosting a Comic-Con-themed show in San Diego this month.

But the myriad events were a joyful reprieve from the 32-year-old entertainer's cancer treatment.

The performances were the first time Aang took to the stage since having one-third of a lung along with a fast-growing 11-inch tumor removed in May. Breathing is still a challenge, but to Aang, the struggle is worth it to be back serving looks onstage.

"I know my family, they're like … 'Don't use your energy.' But only I know how much it makes me feel good," Aang said.

Aang, whose real name is Eduardo but who did not wish to be fully identified because some of his family is not aware of his LGBTQ+ identity, uses all pronouns fluidly, but for clarity in this article, Aang suggested using only he/him/his. Preferring to perform as a drag creature, Aang is not tied to being a king or queen onstage.

A longtime fan of drag, Aang said it wasn't until an initial bout with cancer – a malignant tumor in the left knee – that performing became important.

'I had found myself'

Born in Mexico, Aang had been living in San Diego off and on for a little over 10 years when he was diagnosed with osteosarcoma in 2021. A bone tumor in his knee had grown debilitating large, in part because of a delay in diagnosis during the COVID-19 pandemic.

He returned to his small hometown in the Michoacan state of Mexico and spent the next year and half undergoing treatment. Ultimately, surgery that shortened his leg was necessary, along with chemotherapy.

The physical pain was brutal, Aang said, but not as bad as the emotional pain he suffered being with his non-affirming family, away from supportive friends and a welcoming life in San Diego.

"I had found myself. I had … tasted the freedom of being here," he said. "Having to go back to a place where you kind of have to shrink again … it was so traumatic."

Watching "RuPaul's Drag Race" and other drag shows helped Aang cope – despite negative comments from his conservative religious family.

"I was shocked that even with what was going on, especially my mom, she just wouldn't open up," Aang recalled. "I'm pretty much dying, and you're still like, 'Oh, I don't like that you watch those shows.' … And I'm like, 'Mother, I have no eyebrows.'"

A unique style

When Aang recovered, he had a newfound lease on life and was determined to find joy and spread it. Back in San Diego, a cosplay hobby turned into gender-bending drag performances. In 2023, the drag persona Aang Xiety emerged; the name is a nod to the titular protagonist in "Avatar: The Last Airbender" and a pun on an emotional state.

Onstage, Aang mesmerizes audiences, transforming into a sparkling fairy queen or a moss-bearded forest king. Performances range from politically challenging to delightfully corny.

San Diego drag king Hans E Barr, the persona of Rhyse Tamez, praised Aang's unique form of drag.

"I really admire how Aang has, from the beginning, been unapologetically himself and showing up to the gigs with his own unique vision, coming from his own heart, and not trying to prescribe his performances to a RuPaul style, or even what the local scene has to offer," Barr said. "(Drag) doesn't have to be one size fits all. It really, truly can look like anything."

Aang's signature performance is prancing around as a reindeer with wings while lip-syncing "Colors of the Wind," from his favorite Disney princess Pocahontas. Whether animal or human, Aang Xiety is always fae.

Growing up, Aang said he saw himself as a fairy. A fantasy world with imaginary friends was often intruded upon by a reality where kids were bullies and his mother feared decorative gnomes were of the devil.

His drag persona is an outward expression of that inner child, finally allowed to be free, Aang said.

"I'm this magical creature. I feel I'm paying back to my kid. I'm letting him play more because I think he would have liked to play a little more, and he wasn't allowed to or he was maybe judged," Aang said.

A full and fulfilling life

For the past two years, life has been full for Aang. He has been a popular entertainer in San Diego and Tijuana's many drag shows, performing in both English and Spanish. He worked at Sunnyboy Biscuit Company in Hillcrest, spent hours volunteering and moved in with his boyfriend. He even auditioned for a role on "Drag Race México."

Then in February, he found out the cancer had returned and metastasized in his lungs.

"When I thought, 'I'm dying,' it was also OK with me," Aang said. "I've lived, I've met my idol, I've found love, I found good friends, I found drag."

"(But) I don't think Aang is ready to go," he added. "Aang is just starting. … I think Aang needs more time."

Some dreams for Aang have been deferred. TV auditions were halted, and most of his performances were canceled.

His advocacy continued, though. In April, Aang performed at Lip Sync for a Life, a cancer benefit organized by Barr, where Aang spoke about cancer and his fear that every performance will be his last.

And for the first time, Aang didn't hide his disabilities, using a cane to support his shorter leg and stopping to breathe with an oxygen inhaler in the middle of the number.

"I honestly thought (using the inhaler) was scripted because it was just such an empowering moment, but it wasn't," Barr said of his friend's performance. "That was just genuinely what they needed to do."

For a drag artist who trades in fantasy, it was an intrusion Aang never wanted. But taking the stage was too important.

"The crowd went wild for it, especially after already hearing his story," Barr said. "It was very empowering and very impactful. I got chills and started to cry."

Days later, doctors drained 6.5 liters of fluid from Aang's lung and discovered the tumor there had ballooned from 2 inches to 11 inches in two months.

Finding a purpose

As health complications from his stage 4 cancer pile up, Aang is still accepting, positive, resilient. He believes everything happens for a reason – not in the sense that even the worst situations were ordained, but in that he can find a purpose even in the darkest times.

Amid these bleak circumstances, Aang has improved his relationship with his family. He said he wasn't willing to conceal his true self again as he did the first time he sought their help during treatment.

"I wanted to tell them, 'This is me,'" he said. "I was not willing to do that again. I felt like I was betraying myself, my own essence, by hiding it to (get) help because I had no other choice."

Difficult conversations yielded better-than-expected outcomes. Aang told his family about his drag career and that someday, they would see him on TV. He introduced them to his partner and wore the clothes and makeup he loves around them.

"It feels great," Aang said, adding that his family now knows who he is and what he's doing. "I feel this was the purpose of this second time getting the cancer."

Aang isn't sure what the future holds. He is scheduled for surgery in August to remove a separate tumor from his left lung, and a new scan showed a pinprick of cancer cells have returned to his right lung.

But he intends to fight – and perform – for as long as he can.

"If it's a journey, I'm down," he said. "But I'm, like, let me have fun during it."



Aang Xiety, 32, uses drag as a way to let his inner child play in a fantasy world of fairies and magic. (PHOTO BY XING PHOTO STUDIO/COURTESY AANG XIETY)



Aang Xiety describes himself not as a drag queen or king, but as a drag creature. (PHOTO BY XING PHOTO STUDIO/ COURTESY DRAG FORWARD LLC)



Hans E Barr, left, and Aang Xiety hug after cancer benefit show Lip Sync for a Life on April 12, 2025, at Number One Fifth Avenue. Days later, Aang had nearly two gallons of fluid drained from his lung and a tumor removed. (PHOTO BY VEROCITY PRODUCTIONS/COURTESY DRAG FORWARD LLC)

Hillcrest artist honors diverse identities in colorful woodwork at Studio Door

By DREW SITTON / Times of San Diego

Amid national efforts to end Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs, Hillcrest-based artist Carole Kuck felt it was important for the identities of LGBTQ+ youth to be seen and described, made real and present. In her new series "BOLD AND BRILLIANT: The Colors of LGBTQIA+ Pride" to be shown at the Studio Door's annual PROUD+ art show starting July 3, she honored the full spectrum of sexualities and gender identities through acrylic paintings on wood using the colors of 50 inclusive pride flag variations.

"Given these efforts to essentially make people disappear, I wanted to find a way to say we are not disappearing. We are not going away. We are not hiding. In fact, we are here even bigger and bolder," Kuck said of her hand-painted woodworking.

Since Gilbert Baker, the self-described gay Betsy Ross, designed the first eight-color Pride flag in 1977, the flag has been updated a number of times due to limited dye availability and to ensure everyone, including people of color, trans identities and intersex people, were represented in the flag. Other artists created a number of flags for specific identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella.

As Kuck researched the history of pride flags, she was inspired by the self-awareness of the flag creators and their freedom to be fully themselves.

The 67-year-old artist was fascinated by how flags, like her own once primarily pink lesbian flag, evolved to add more colors like oranges and magentas to be more inclusive. She delighted in finding flags for subcategories, like the butch lesbian flag infused with blues and purples.

"When I started painting it and I had this vision, it was really about us as individuals expressing who we are, being who we are, freely. But as the project completed... I can see that it is also about humanity as a whole ... how beautiful we are together," Kuck said.

The bright and beautiful acrylic paintings cover wooden wall panels, blocks, posts and cubes. The only time all 80 pieces will be shown together, with the full spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities, is at the Studio Door in July.

Patric Stillman, owner of Studio Door, first showcased the emerging painter's work in 2023 as Kuck developed her skills following her retirement as a math teacher.

"I'm so proud of Carole because she has decided, with this body of work, to really embrace who she is and bring that forward into the community," Stillman said. "I feel like any artist who is really looking outward to the people around them, that it's a remarkable thing. And she is very successful in achieving that with this series."

The pieces are available for sale on her website carolekuckart.com and she will also take commissions for people seeking specific flags. To see them in person as well as art from other contemporary LGBTQ+ artists, visit the Studio Door at 3867 4th Ave.





'Given these efforts to essentially make people disappear, I wanted to find a way to say we are not disappearing. We are not going away. We are not hiding. In fact, we are here even bigger and bolder.'

- HILLCREST-BASED ARTIST CAROLE KUCK



Hillcrest-based artist Carole Kuck, 67, stands with her "BOLD AND BRILLIANT: The Colors of LGBTQIA+ Pride" series.
(PHOTOS COURTESY CAROLE KUCK)







Assemblymember Ward: Pride reminds the community what they are fighting for

By DREW SITTON / Times of San Diego

During the summer recess of the California legislature, Assemblymember Chris Ward (D-78) will be back in San Diego to celebrate Pride with his family and longtime friends. As the chair of the LGBTQ Caucus in the capitol, he also plans on hosting a round table with local LGBTQ+ leaders to keep them apprised of the caucus' work and bills affecting the community.

His fellow legislators in the caucus decided this was not only a year to play defense to anti-LGBTQ+ federal actions, but to still work towards progress. They have sponsored bills advancing gender-affirming health equity and data privacy mirroring protections instituted for reproductive healthcare workers and patients seeking abortions in California after the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade.

Amid a state budget crisis, they are fighting to fund HIV prevention and care resources on the chopping block. Let's not forget the need to stay connected to their local districts and support LGBTQ+ people at home. Their work is multi-pronged, ambitious and strategic.

The caucus is more powerful than ever with 14 members – seven in the Assembly and seven in the Senate. California is the first state for LGBTQ+ members to surpass 10% in the legislature, achieving parity with the general population. While the membership has grown since five lesbian and gay legislators founded the caucus in 2002, including San Diego's own Chris Kehoe, they are also facing new difficulties.

Youth under threat

After the right-ward shift in the November election, Sacramento has seen an influx in legislation targeting the LGBTQ+ community. So far, Ward said the caucus has been 100% successful in killing those bills but not without cost.

At a long hearing about a bill aiming to repeal protections for transgender youth in school sports, Ward recalled the difficulty of excavating his own painful memories on the floor of the Assembly to explain the personal toll such a bill would have on young and vulnerable Californians. While not transgender, he can relate to the feeling of fear they face. He recalls struggling with his sexuality in high school along with messages that he was wrong, not normal and had no future if he was gay.



LGBTQ+ activist Susan Jester and Assemblymember Chris Ward walk through the Capitol for a ceremony where she was named Ward's 2025 Pride Honoree. (COURTESY OFFICE OF ASSEMBLYMEMBER CHRIS WARD)

"I relate that feeling and realize that (we have) had some advancements, and we can always lose those advancements, and we're going to fight like hell for those," Ward said. "The emotion really takes you back to a very personal and painful memory where you live through that hurt and those years, and you never want that to happen to kids today."

Ward feels added pressure to defeat these bills because LGBTQ+ children's life and future depend on it just as his once did.

His adult success might belie the fears of his younger self. After starting his career as an environmental planner, he has fought climate change, worked to build housing and addressed homelessness since entering office. He has been undefeated at the ballot box since first running in 2016 to take up the mantle of the third City Council district, long the center of LGBTQ+ political power in San Diego, then moving to the Assembly in 2020. When not in Sacramento, he is living the domestic dream with his husband Thom Harpole and two children, Betty and Billy, in University Heights.

Pride requires community

A turning point in his life occurred at San Diego Pride in 1998. At the time, he was testing



Assemblymember Chris Ward, center, with the other six Assembly members in the LGBTQ Legislative Caucus. (COURTESY OFFICE OF ASSEMBLYMEMBER CHRIS WARD)

out places like San Diego to live after graduating college. He grew up in a military family without a permanent place to call home. When he attended the parade and festival, Ward was blown away by how large, organized and together the LGBTQ+ community was. Pride made him decide to stay.

"That was sort of the event that crystallized that I had found my forever home. And it was a community I wanted to be a part of, be engaged with, volunteer with, and find myself and establish roots," Ward said.

Now, Pride month is a time to reconnect with friends he has known for decades and spend quality time with his family. For his kids, they have participated in the parade, been spectators, attended the festival and gone to backyard parties. While they have always had two dads, interacting with other diverse families helps show their upbringing is normal. Celebrating pride is all they have ever known.

As national sentiment towards LGBTQ+ people sours, he urges others to remain in community too. Isolation can lead to hopelessness and choosing to conform to appease hate actors, he warns. Ward believes that during the dark days after the election, it is important to remember not only to fight against something, but to fight for something as well.

"Continue to be yourself and show them that... you are awesome," Ward said. "We're going to be able to get through this together."



‘Can’t erase us’ Drag queens march in Hillcrest for trans rights

By Madeline Nguyen / Times of San Diego

Famous drag icons and local artists lip-synced, vogued and marched through Hillcrest on June 15 to stand up for the transgender community as it faces a record-breaking rollback of protections under the Trump administration.

San Diego’s resident “RuPaul’s Drag Race” star Chad Michaels joined the city’s drag stars to parade glittery garments, bejeweled boots and vividly colored veils down the city’s gayborhood. The colorful march attracting hundreds served as a raucous finale to a weekend of peaceful protests against the Trump administration in San Diego.

Following on the heels of Saturday’s massive No Kings Day protest downtown, the third annual San Diego Drag March for Trans Rights brought drag artists and San Diegans together to rally support for trans rights.

This time, organizers say the colorful moment of celebration was a much-needed bright spot in a dark year for the city’s transgender community.

“Our world is so full of people who are trying to erase us, people who are trying to say that we don’t count, people who are trying to say that we are not worthy, that all we can do is fall back on the joy and happiness that we create,” said Sister Amanda Reckinwith, a local drag queen who hosted the march and did not want to be identified beyond that. “We create this through the rainbow of our diversity.”

Through chants of “Protect the dolls,” and “Trans rights are human rights,” this year’s march championed support and safety for transgender people amid an ongoing surge in anti-transgender legislation — from athletics to health care.

March stands out for centering transgender pride

Every year since San Diego’s drag queens started holding the city’s Drag March during Pride Month 2023, Trevor Herbert has made it a point to show up and fly the pink, blue and white flag representing transgender people like him — with the words “Protect trans kids,” written in bold black paint.

“If you have a voice, it’s really important that you speak out,” Herbert said. “And so, I’m speaking out on behalf of myself and others who can’t speak out right now.”

The march stood out amid the many Pride celebrations taking place because it centers transgender people, like Herbert.

Rally organizer Benny Cartwright said local drag queens started the Drag March so the city’s transgender community could enjoy its own dedicated celebration during Pride Month — free from the prejudice that transgender people have faced both within and outside of the LGBTQ+ umbrella.

“For the LGBTQ community, the trans and nonbinary part of that acronym is a very important, vital part of our community,” Cartwright said. “And for decades, not only within our community but outside the community, they’ve been erased, not as visible, not given the same access as the LGB counterparts.”



Hundreds of marchers wielded colorful posters and chanted, “This is what community looks like,” down University Avenue, past the historic Hillcrest sign, on June 15, 2025. (PHOTO BY MADELINE NGUYEN/TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)

While transgender people have long faced prejudice and discrimination, organizers say this year’s Drag March felt even more essential as the transgender community reels from an explosion of anti-trans Supreme Court decisions and regulations. Hundreds more anti-transgender bills are moving through legislatures nationwide.

The flood of rollbacks began with President Donald Trump’s first day in office in January, when he signed a slew of executive orders all signaling his administration’s view that transgender and nonbinary people don’t exist.

“As of today, it will henceforth be the official policy of the United States government that there are only two genders, male and female,” Trump said in his inauguration speech.

Through hours of poster-making at gay bar Urban MO’s, marching on University Avenue and outdoor drag performances at Rich’s San Diego, Reckinwith said the march gave transgender people the “superpower” of visibility in the face of erasure.

“We have to one by one, by just our existence, we have to show that we exist,” Reckinwith said. “We deserve to be educated. We deserve to have our health care.”

“We deserve to just be identified and respected.”

Marchers slam transgender military ban

While the tens of thousands of transgender people who call San Diego County home live in a state with one of the lowest levels of anti-transgender legislation, they’re still affected by the Trump administration’s far-reaching wave of restrictions.

The federal rollbacks were front and center at the Drag March, but they didn’t dampen the mood. The

SEE MARCH, Page 21

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New Pride office mural celebrates local LGBTQ+ history

By DREW SITTON / Times of San Diego

The San Diego Pride office has long been a bright spot of color along 30th Street in North Park with its turquoise walls and many community flags. Thanks to a new mural, the office shines even more, amplifying the visibility of the LGBTQ+ community.

Andrea Mulpas and German Rojas designed the mural, called "Liberation Ball," after a call for artists from Art of Pride in partnership with Lambda Archives.

Ahead of creating the piece, which includes a diverse array of people with one carrying a Progress Pride flag, the two met with historians at Lambda Archives who shared information and photos from past San Diego Pride parades and festivals. Then, Pride fundraised for the mural costs which was completed in May.

The people depicted in the mural can all be found in archival footage of Pride events, with only a little artistic license.

"I'm hoping people see… we're just the same as anyone else. We're just people. We deserve to live and stay safe," Rojas said in a phone call. "This is a community where all sorts of people [live] and we're not gonna go anywhere."



The San Diego Pride office in North Park has a new mural on its exterior wall designed from past photos of local Pride events from Lambda Archives. (PHOTO BY PAUL MARGOLIS/OUR TOWN SD)



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$1,300,000



$2,225,000



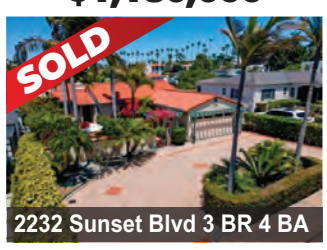
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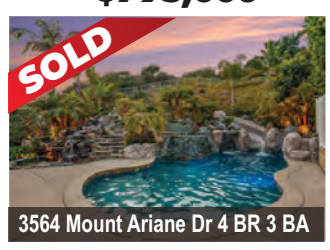
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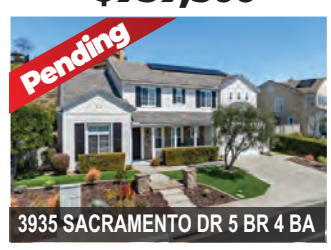
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$1,344,995



$775,000



$840,000



$960,000



$989,000



$718,995



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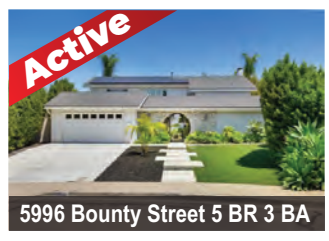
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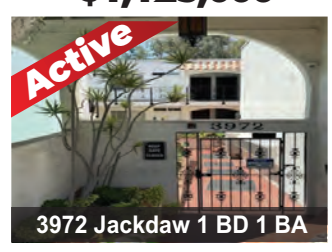
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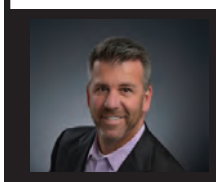
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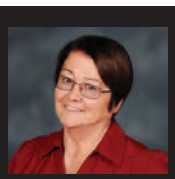
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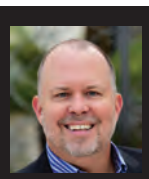
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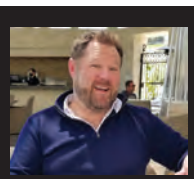

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REALTOR®
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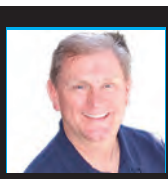

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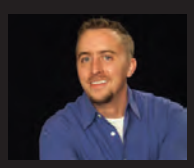

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THINGS TO DO PRIDE WEEK

PRIDE YOGA AND DANCE PARTY
The San Diego Symphony and Fit Athletic will host another all-levels yoga class led by Viktoria Talbot followed by a dance party on Wednesday, July 16 at The Rady Shell. Doors open at 6 p.m. Registration for the free even is required at theshell.org.

LIGHT UP THE CATHEDRAL
The interfaith Pride service hosted by St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral (2728 Sixth Ave.) is celebrating its 10 year anniversary and presenting the Light of Pride award to outgoing Metropolitan Community Church Pastor Dan Koeshall from 7 to 9 p.m. on Wednesday, July 16. sdpride.org/lightup

PRIDE ARTISAN MARKET
Head to Alma Hotel's fourth floor rooftop pool (1047 Fifth Ave.) for an artisan market from local LGBTQ+ owned or friendly vendors from 1 to 5 p.m. on Friday, July 18. A paid Keith Haring-inspired paint and sip class will also be offered from 1 to 4 p.m. stayalma.com/offers/pride-artisan-market/

SPIRIT OF STONEWALL RALLY
The annual rally by the Hillcrest Pride Flag centers LGBTQ+ activism in honor of the 1969 riots by honoring local leaders with speakers addressing top issues facing the community at 6 p.m. on Friday, July 18. Pride flag raising at 7 p.m. sdpride.org/rally-2025

PRIDE 5K
Presented by Front Runners and Walkers, the Pride 5k takes place at 8 a.m. on Saturday, July 19 along the parade route and is open to runners, walkers, prancers and skippers. Registration is $54 and benefits The Center's Youth Housing Project and Pride's community grants. frwsd.org/pride5k

PRIDE PARADE
Hundreds of contingents will once again march through Hillcrest to Balboa Park, exemplifying the diversity of the LGBTQ+ community in the largest parade in the region from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturday, July 19. The route will be slightly shorter this year, starting at University and Richmond avenues rather than Normal Street due to construction. sdpride.org/parade-2025

PRIDE FESTIVAL
The two-day festival brings multiple music stages, community resources and queer-owned businesses together inside Balboa Park along Sixth Avenue and Laurel Street from noon to 10 p.m. on Saturday, July 19 with Kehlani as headliner and from noon to 9 p.m. on Sunday, July 20 with Kim Petras as headliner. Tickets start at $40. sdpride.org/festival

J PRIDE FESTIVAL
Local Jewish organizations and synagogues are hosting a community festival for Jewish LGBTQ+ people and allies from 2 to 4 p.m. on Saturday, July 19 at the Jacobs Family Campus of Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center (4126 Executive Dr., La Jolla). lfjcc.org/about/liveup.aspx

LE PARTIES SUNDAY POOL PARTIES
Le Parties closes out Pride weekend with Haus of Splash and Lez Get Wet with DJs by the pool from 1 to 7 p.m. on Sunday, July 20 at the DoubleTree by Hilton Mission Valley (7450 Hazard Center Dr.). Tickets start at $44. leparties.com/events

FESTIVAL GUIDE

STONE WALL STAGE

SATURDAY

Dan Diego	12:00 - 1:00 p.m.
VIRR	1:00 - 1:45 p.m.
MEL 4EVER	3:00 - 3:30 p.m.
ALL-STAR EXTRAVAGANZA: Angeria Paris, VanMichaels, Lyida, B Kkollins, Olivia Lux	4:00 - 5:00 p.m.
Dragonette	5:05 - 5:50 p.m.
Sam Blacky	6:10 - 7:10 p.m.
Ric Wilson	7:15 - 8:00 p.m.
Kehlani	8:50 - 9:50 p.m.

SUNDAY

Jinx Mirage	12:05 - 12:55 p.m.
Khalil Nash	1:05 - 1:50 p.m.
Trans Chorus of Los Angeles	2:15 - 2:45 p.m.
N2N	3:00 - 4:00 p.m.
True Colors Revue	4:00 - 4:45 p.m.
Jordy	5:15 - 6:00 p.m.
Austin Millz	6:15 - 7:15 p.m.
Kim Petras	7:45 - 8:45 p.m.

EUPHORIA

SATURDAY

XAKTI	12:00 - 1:00 p.m.
Kasama	1:00 - 2:00 p.m.
JAQ.XS	2:00 - 3:00 p.m.
Mai Mai	3:00 - 4:00 p.m.
Erick Diaz	4:00 - 5:00 p.m.
ZOF	5:00 - 6:00 p.m.
Robin Roth	6:00 - 7:00 p.m.
Succubus	7:00 - 8:00 p.m.
Only Fire	8:00 - 10:00 p.m.

SUNDAY

Evan Spalding	12:00 - 1:00 p.m.
Vozz	1:00 - 2:00 p.m.
Lady Afrodisiac	2:00 - 3:00 p.m.
DJ SINDRI	3:00 - 4:00 p.m.
Avi Snow	4:00 - 5:00 p.m.
Heidi Lawden	5:00 - 6:00 p.m.
DJ Cindel	6:00 - 8:00 p.m.
Danni G	8:00 - 9:00 p.m.

MOVEMENT

SATURDAY

DJ MYYON	12:00 - 2:00 p.m.
Pur Flo	2:00 - 3:00 p.m.
SD Kiki Scene	3:05 - 3:50 p.m.
Black House Radio	4:00 - 6:00 p.m.
UNIIQU3	6:00 - 7:30 p.m.
BBYAFRICKA	7:40 - 8:40 p.m.
DJ Almond Eyez	9:00 - 10:00 p.m.

SUNDAY

DJ AG	12:00 - 1:00 p.m.
Zion	1:00 - 2:00 p.m.


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Best of Downtown 2024 San Diego
Uptown News Best of Uptown 2024 San Diego
Mission Valley News Best of Mission Valley 2023



MOVEMENT (cont.)

SUNDAY

Peaches & Queens	2:00 - 3:00 p.m.
Zion	1:00 - 2:00 p.m.
Nico Craig	3:00 - 4:00 p.m.
Suni MF	4:15 - 4:45 p.m.
Mary Mac	5:00 - 7:00 p.m.
Hevrock	7:00 - 8:00 p.m.
Alex D	8:00 - 9:00 p.m.

MUNDO LATINO

SATURDAY

DJ Linz	12:00 - 1:45 p.m.
Suzy Cue	1:50 - 2:50 p.m.
Mila Tina	2:55 - 3:25 p.m.
María San Román	3:50 - 4:35 p.m.
La Bomba Drag Show	4:55 - 5:45 p.m.
Kat Dahlia	6:00 - 7:00 p.m.
Maria Romano	7:20 - 8:20 p.m.
Saint Hills	8:21 - 10:00 p.m.

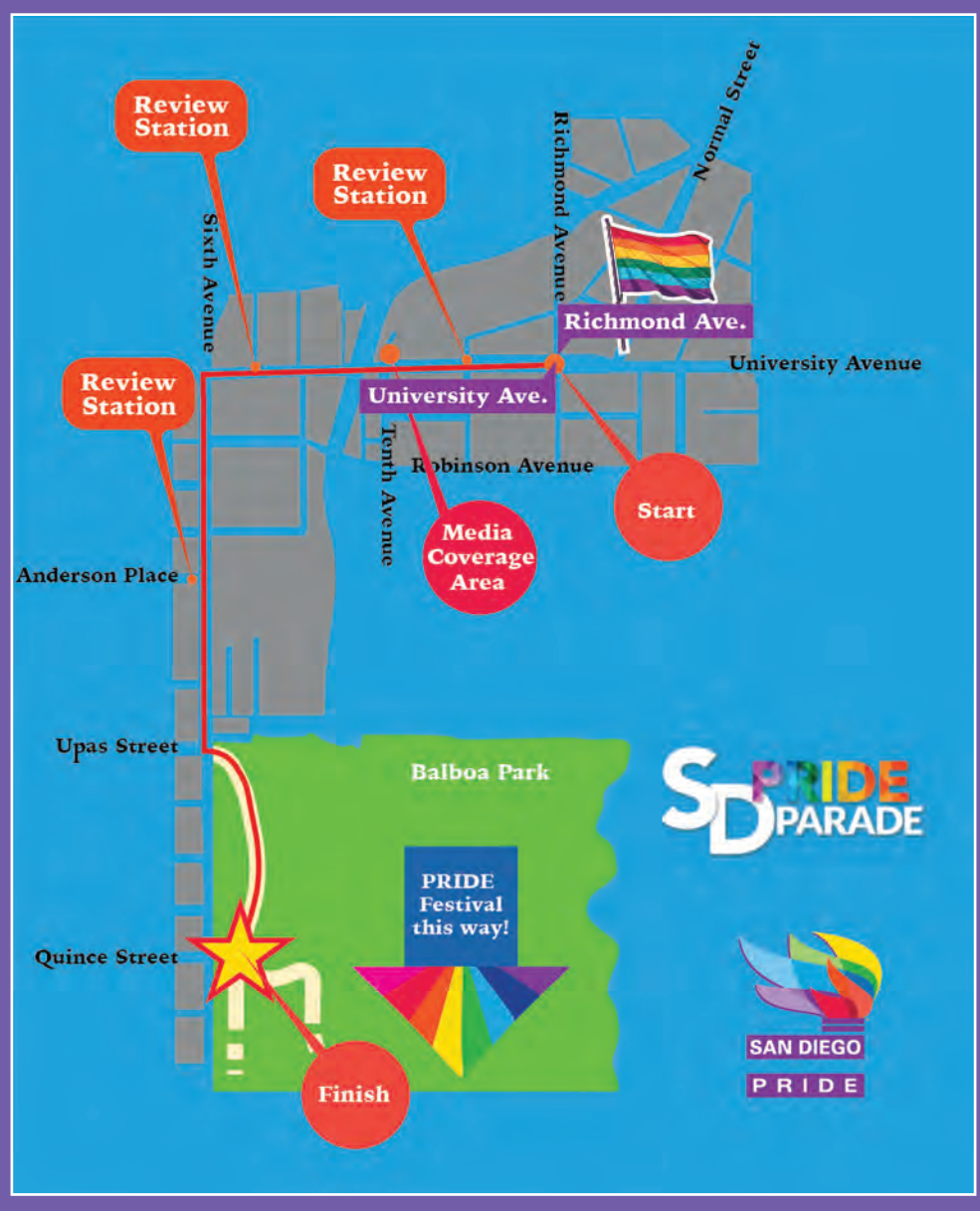
SUNDAY

Alex Vaduz	1:00 - 1:15 p.m.
Betty Bangs	1:15 - 2:15 p.m.
Alegria	2:20 - 2:50 p.m.
Manny Cepeda Trio	3:40 - 5:00 p.m.
The Neighborhood Kids	6:00 - 7:00 p.m.
Ukeim	7:15 - 8:15 p.m.
DJ OLGA T	8:15 - 9:00 p.m.

QUEER MARKETPLACE

SATURDAY

Nexus Harmony	4:00 - 4:30 p.m.





Queer authors build your 'to be read' list

By **DREW SITTON** / Times of San Diego

San Diego isn't known for its literary scene. Possibly there is too much good weather to attract the dreary, writerly types galore in Portland and New York City.

The region is far from talentless though, especially when it comes to LGBTQ+ authors.

After all, the mother of lesbian history Lillian Faderman wrote her many nonfiction books while living here. Rolando-based author and poet Mac (Marisa) Crane won a LAMBDA Literary Award in speculative fiction for their debut "I Keep my Exoskeletons to Myself" and followed it up in May with "A Sharp Endless Need."

To create a to-be-read (TBR) list of LGBTQ+ books, we checked in with two local queer authors about what books they have loved this year or are looking forward to reading once published. Some of them can even be read on the beach while enjoying San Diego's glorious sun.

BECCA ERIN TITLE

Becca Erin Title published "Nothing to Write Home About" this spring, a contemporary rom-com set in the hills of North Carolina where two dueling summer camp directors play too many games of sexy Truth or Dare to not fall for each other. Plus, Title is the owner of Meet Cute Romance Bookshop in La Mesa. Here, she shares her romance genre expertise.



Becca Erin Title, 34, holds her self-published debut novel "Nothing to Write Home About" inside her independent romance bookstore Meet Cute on May 1, 2025. (PHOTO BY BECCA TITLE)

"There are so many wonderful queer romances that have come out (no pun intended) or will come out this year."

"The River Has Roots" by Amal El-Mohtar, a fantasy romance novella about a human and a fae, is already one of my favorite books of the year. "Flight of the Fallen" by Hana Lee completes a duology with Mad Max vibes. In the world of historical romance, we have books by two of my favorite authors: "A Rare Find" by Joanna Lowell and "Ladies in Hating" by Alexandra Vasti. In the fall, for cozy/spooky season, we get "The Most Unusual Haunting of Edgar Lovejoy" by Roan Parrish and then two fantasy romances from literary powerhouses: "Son of the Morning" by Akwaeke Emezi and "The Isle in the Silver Sea" by Tasha Suri (which is part of a 2025 mini-trend of books about lady knights).

LAUREN MARIE FLEMING

In late 2024, Entangled published Lauren Marie Fleming's debut novel "Because Fat Girl," a contemporary Hollywood rom-com where the woman who has always been too much – too fat, too queer, too weird – is just enough for an A-list actor. Xe also founded School for Writers with the aim to diversify publishing. Add these prideful historical fiction novels to your TBR!



Lauren Marie Fleming in her Bankers Hill apartment in 2024 (PHOTO BY ANGELA GARZON)

For years, I thought I hated history, until I read "Tipping the Velvet" by Sarah Waters. Turns out, I just hated the erasure of LGBTQ people from those stories. Now, I devour queer and trans historical fiction, loving the reminder that we have found ways to build communities and thrive together.

Here are three recent novels I love that highlight LGBTQ love and joy throughout the ages:

"The Thrill of the Chase" by Kathryn Nolan (Entangled) – Its own tiny revolution, this book is a thrilling treasure hunt full of mystery, history, and heart pumping bisexual romance.

"Lady Like" by MacKenzie Lee – A delightful sapphic romp through Regency England that will keep you on your toes until the very end.

"Forget Me Knot" by Emery Lee – This romantasy reimagining of the Japanese Red String of Fate myth will make you believe in the power of queer and trans love.

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An array of delicious new restaurants await San Diego Pride goers

By Frank Sabatini Jr. / Times of San Diego

At only seven months into 2025, our local culinary scene is enjoying a robust year in terms of recent restaurant openings.

They've arrived just in time for July's massive San Diego Pride celebration, bringing with them diverse sustenance that will fuel the minds and bodies of more than 100,000 revelers traversing Hillcrest and its surrounding neighborhoods.

While we fully support our city's well-established kitchens, we encourage Pride goers to also fork into these newcomers, which are locally owned, LGBTQ-friendly and promising contributors to our city's economy.

Dreamboat (and Vulture)

4608 Park Blvd., University Heights
619-790-8587, dreamboatdiner.com



A lunch counter with nostalgic touches at Dreamboat (PHOTOS BY FRANK SABATINI JR./SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)

From the owners of the ever-popular Kindred in South Park is their next vegan venture, but with the styling of a cozy old-fashion diner.

Dreamboat features a lunch counter that seats about 10 people. Along the wall behind it are a few table shelves with space to stand.

Nowhere on the menu does it indicate that the food is 100 percent plant-based, which can be misleading when you see listed dishes such as sausage breakfast sandwiches and double-patty cheeseburgers. But their vegan recreations are flavorful and wholesome.

Dreamboat also houses Vulture, a secret backroom bar and restaurant accessed from a doorway at the end of the lunch counter. Expect crafty cocktails and an elevated bill of fare once inside.

Frenchy's Hideout

142 W. University Ave., Hillcrest
619-539-7248, frenchyshideout.com



Frenchy's Hideout brings Parisian cuisine to the gayborhood

If you're looking to regroup and catch your breath from the jubilant hustle of Pride weekend, Frenchy's Hideout offers a Parisian-style escape.

The elegant bistro was launched recently by sommelier and Paris native Michael Simpson, who brings to the table fine wines and a menu that includes classic French favorites. Dishes include house-made pate, ratatouille, escargot and steak frites. Patrons can also enjoy table-side flambe desserts.

In addition, happy hour offers price breaks on select dishes and drinks. It's held from 3 to 6 p.m., Tuesday through Thursday, and 3 to 5 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.



Get your wine and tapas fix at San Diego's newest 'listening cafe.'

Nomade

3027 Adams Ave., North Park
nomadetapasandrecords.com

A menu of internationally inspired tapas sets the tone for music played on turntables. The cafe's vast collection of albums adds to the chic but unpretentious interior design, which features a roomy bar and tables along the front windows.

An extensive wine list complements small plates featuring classic patatas bravas, shrimp skewers, shishito peppers and more. The establishment was recently launched by Juan Carlos Gomez, who owns the long-established El Agave Restaurant & Tequileria in Old Town.



Taqueria Tijanense makes its San Diego debut.

Taqueria Tijuanense

406 University Ave., Hillcrest
818-309-0117, taqueriatijuanazo.com

With seven locations in Tijuana, this taqueria has become all the rage since opening in the gayborhood earlier this year.

It's where you'll find authentic south-of-the-border fare such as vampiros on corn tostadas; popular mulitas involving a choice of meats sandwiched between two tortillas; and a large variety of torta sandwiches using fresh Mexican-style rolls. The menu extends also to tacos, burritos, quesadillas and refreshing agua frescas.

Cherries & Batter

420 Robinson St., Hillcrest
619-230-5071, cherriesandbatter

With the goal of opening shortly before Pride weekend, Cherries & Batter will give consumers a big taste of breakfast with a focus on pancakes—from the standard buttermilk variety to unspecified versions described on the website as "something more adventurous."

The eatery is the brainchild of Jose Roberto of Roberto's Taco Shop fame. He took over the shuttered Au Revoir restaurant in the heart of Hillcrest for this anticipated venture.



Authentic Turkish cuisine has arrived in San Diego. (PHOTO COURTESY BOSFORO)

Bosforo

3201 Adams Ave., Normal Heights
619-634-9646, bosforosd.com

Since opening in spring, foodies have flocked to Bosforo for its marvelous Turkish cuisine found commonly in kitchens throughout Istanbul.

Music usually fills the air as chef Seckin Sage Anlasbay woos diners with wood-fired kabobs, Turkish-style pizzas and an array of other small and full-size dishes. For groups of three to four guests, the dazzling kebap platter is the way to go.

Turkish coffee, yogurt drinks and fermented turnip juice called salgam are some of the traditional beverage choices in addition to Turkish spirits and cocktails.



The chimichurri steak plate at Urban Plates

Urban Plates

1620 Camino de la Reina, Mission Valley
619-877-0026, urbanplates.com

Even though it was founded 14 years ago in Del Mar, this whole-some-food restaurant recently opened its first metro San Diego location in Mission Valley, which is a short jaunt from all the Pride activities. It sits conveniently on the San Diego Metropolitan Transit's green trolley line at the Mission Valley Center station.

The chic-industrial atmosphere offers spacious indoor-outdoor dining areas, which are for the choosing after placing your order at the front counter. Expect an affordable menu of substantial salads, bowls, sandwiches and plate meals—with many of their ingredients organic. If you make it to dessert, the pineapple-banana "hummingbird cake" with orange cream cheese frosting is a must-try.

Sonny's Pizza

1728 Madison Ave., University Heights
619-432-1838, letsgetsonnys.com

Local restaurateurs Matt Sieve and Jeff Fink (of Madison and Madi restaurants) opened this pizzeria with "Brooklyn vibes" in May inside a century-old structure that used to house San Diego trolley cars.



The new Sonny's Pizza in University Heights.

The 3,500-square-foot space is now home to picnic tables and Italian-inspired décor that includes photographs of well-known New Yorkers. Twelve-inch pizzas, baked clams and pasta dishes rule the day.

Sieve describes Sonny's pizza as "a hybrid between Neapolitan and New York-style."

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Kings Club to celebrate 25 years San Diego boasts longest-running drag king troupe in America

By DREW SITTON / Times of San Diego

It's 8 p.m. on a Friday night and the hoedown song "Drag King Bar" is blaring through the speakers at Gossip Grill in Hillcrest.

This is the traditional opening to the San Diego Kings Club show. Return audience members stomp and clap to the music, while tables of newcomers look on as the host, Ajax, takes the stage.

Ajax's job is to prep the crowd. Some people here tonight have never seen a drag king before – even though San Diego's own Kings Club claims the title of longest-running troupe of its kind in America.

The Kings Club has been a mainstay of San Diego's queer women's bars for 25 years, enduring as different venues opened, closed and changed. The troupe even survived a period when there were no lesbian bars in the region.

In that time, the art of the performance has changed, too.

In an overly simplistic sense, drag kings mirror drag queens. Where the stock image of a drag queen is a man creating the illusion of being female, historically drag kings were largely women performance artists entertaining as male impersonators.

The reality is far more complex, and today's drag kings say their personas play with aggrandized masculinity and gender stereotypes through a wide array of acts – singing, lip syncing, dancing, comedy and more.

"Drag is an artistic medium in the same way that drawing, painting, dancing, singing is," said drag king Sam Paguita, 29, who does not connect their drag persona with their legal name to avoid scrutiny from potential employers. Paguita began performing online during the pandemic and is now a regular in shows each month at Gossip Grill.

Drag kings hold a significant place in LGBTQ+ history.

Stormé DeLarverie, a male impersonator seen today as a drag king, scuffled with police during a raid of a gay bar in New York in 1969. The scuffle led to a series of spontaneous uprisings that became known as a rebellion, and the site – the Stonewall Inn – became the launching point of the modern gay rights movement.

Despite drag kings' history, the entertainment form is often overshadowed by the image of the drag queen. San Diego-raised RuPaul brought drag queens to the masses through a reality TV media empire. Today, drag kings say that tradition of lip syncing with exaggerated feminine gender performance both defined and limited the medium.

Rituals like the San Diego Kings Club show – which will celebrate its 25th anniversary in September – offer a whole different picture.

"We always have a good time," says Jolene Sebastian, has followed the troupe faithfully for decades. Sebastian holds a dollar in the air as the kickoff act takes the stage.

It's a special night for the performer, who is known both on- and off-stage as Rudy Ramrod. He is the only founding member of the Kings Club who still performs with the troupe. Tonight celebrates Ramrod's 61st birthday.

Ramrod emerges with a puffy goatee, lipsyncing to Disturbed's cover of the political anthem "Land of Confusion." (Drag, as Ajax reminded the crowd, has always been inherently political, as choosing joy in queer performance becomes a form of resistance.)

Halfway through the number, Ramrod rips off a buttoned-up shirt to reveal a T-shirt emblazoned with "Drag is not a crime" in trans flag colors. He begins to play air guitar. The crowd goes wild.

"These people have never seen a king before," he said in an interview. "I just gave them that, and that makes me really happy."

Origins

The history of Kings Club starts with a frustrated performer.

Kelly Harper, a bartender at a now-defunct lesbian bar called the Flame had an on-stage persona named Chess Rockwell. But local drag contests favored established queens. So Harper started a Wednesday drag king contest at the Flame. Random audience members were the judges. Winners weren't allowed to re-enter, so new performers could have a chance.

Rockwell collected the winners of those weekly contests and formed a troupe of seven kings who performed each Friday, starting in September 2000.

"It was like a ritual. Everyone would show up on Friday nights to watch the drag king show," recalled Moe Girton, a former Flame bartender.

When the 20-year-old bar closed in 2004, the troupe moved to another women's bar and added new members after a different style of contest. The troupe continued to evolve as venues changed.

"There have been other groups that have tried. ... They just don't have the staying power and the success we've had," said Lisa Raye, who attended a Kings Club show in 2013 and met one of the performers, Ramrod. Today, they're married. She goes by Lisa Raye – her first and middle names – as an onstage persona.

As San Diego endured a period with no lesbian bars, the club had



Sam Paguita, 29, dances as Jason Vorhees to a musical mashup of "This is Me," from both "Camp Rock" and "The Greatest Showman," at the Kings Club show at Gossip Grill on Friday the 13th in June. (PHOTO BY BRITTANY CRUZ-FEJERAN/SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)

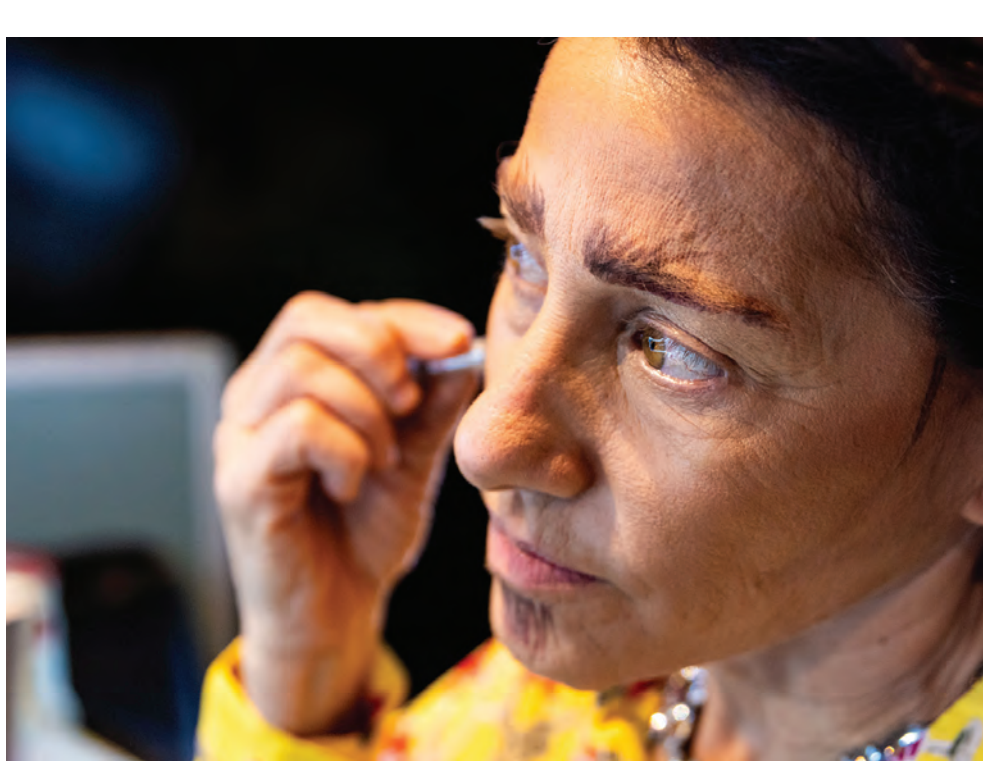




Rudy Ramrod plays air guitar to longtime Kings Club fan Jolene Sebastian on Friday, June 13, 2025 at Gossip Grill. (PHOTO BY BRITTANY CRUZ-FEJERAN/SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)



Disabled drag artist Lisa Raye, 48, lip syncs to "Born This Way" on Friday, June 13, 2025 at Gossip Grill. She credits the Kings Club as where she fell in love with her husband and more importantly, herself. (PHOTO BY BRITTANY CRUZ-FEJERAN/SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)



Crown Vic paints on a sideburn ahead of the Kings Club show on Friday, June 13, 2025 at Gossip Grill. How drag kings create facial hair varies greatly. (PHOTO BY BRITTANY CRUZ-FEJERAN/SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)



Rudy Ramrod, 61, takes a dollar bill from an audience member at the Kings Club show on Friday, June 13, 2025 inside queer women's bar Gossip Grill. Ramrod is the only founding member who still performs with Kings Club 25 years later. (PHOTO BY BRITTANY CRUZ-FEJERAN/SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)

to advocate for space for itself at a series of gay men's bars.

"We've had very, very lean times," said Raye, 48, who performs and is stage manager for the troupe. At one men's bar there were "five people— and that included the performers."

Ramrod brought drag performer Ajax on to host, who encouraged him to keep going despite the struggle to find a home.

After yet another bar was set to close, the troupe knew it needed a home in a women's bar. Gossip Grill, long-known as one of the only lesbian bars in California since its opening in 2009, had moved to a space large enough for performances. In 2015, Ramrod approached the owner – Girton, the former bartender from the Flame.

The Kings Club became the bar's first regular drag show. According to Girton, it still sells out every month.

"It just was a rebirth. It's the right place for us," Ramrod said. "The show started really exploding again."

Changing faces

The lifespan of Kings Club has also seen new kinds of performers emerge.

After shows, Ramrod frequently gets approached by people who want to try out drag. Interest exploded after the pandemic, far beyond the guest slots an entire year's worth of shows could hold.

A new fourth Friday show was launched, Kings and Friends, which lets any interested drag performer take the stage.

Ramrod and other longtime performers noted that the acts that emerged also departed from the classic king persona he embodies.

"Rudy comes from the generation where you needed to have that over-the-top male persona, like the Marlboro Man," said Ajax. The 49-year-old performer declined to be identified beyond that name.

Performers from that era projected their images as heterosexual men. Today's acts encompass more wide-ranging identities.

"The point of this is not to pass as a man," said TJ Barr, 31, the stage name of Kaylin Saur, who hosts Kings and Friends. "The point of this is to tell a story."

New performers still find joy on stage, whether in ridiculous musical or political theater numbers.

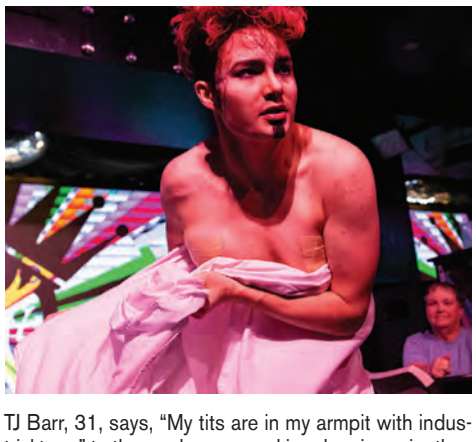
At the Kings and Friends show June 27, one of the newest performers, Scott Cooties, dressed as Elon Musk and sang a breakup song to a heart-shaped cutout of President Trump. Being venerated as a king is especially meaningful for Cooties, 36, who is transgender and asked not to be identified beyond his stage name.

"In my day-to-day life, I'm still really perceived as a woman, even trying not to be. Being able to be Scott and be perceived as part of myself really gives me that opportunity to experience gender euphoria."

Rudy Ramrod credits the transgender rights movement for the change in drag culture.

"People started realizing," he said, that you've "just got to be yourself."

The Kings Club will hold its 25th anniversary show on Friday, Sept. 12, 2025, at Gossip Grill.



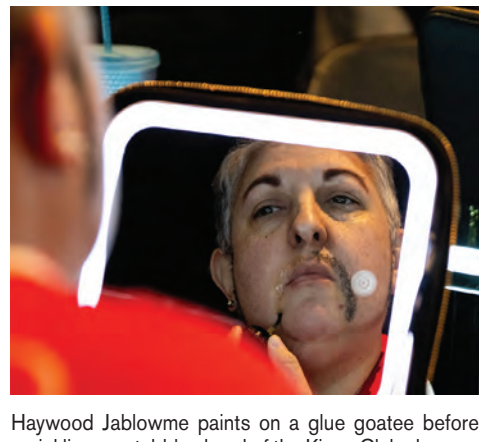
TJ Barr, 31, says, "My tits are in my armpit with industrial tape," to those who assume king drag is easier than queen drag. (PHOTO BY BRITTANY CRUZ-FEJERAN/SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)



Drag king Haywood delights the audience by using a mic suggestively at the Kings Club show at Gossip Grill in Hillcrest on June 13, 2025. (PHOTO BY BRITTANY CRUZ-FEJERAN/SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)



Drag king Crown Vic points during a rendition of "Daft Punk is Playing at My House" at a San Diego Kings Club show at Gossip Grill on Friday, June 13, 2025. (PHOTO BY BRITTANY CRUZ-FEJERAN/SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)



Haywood Jablowme paints on a glue goatee before sprinkling on stubble ahead of the Kings Club show on Friday, June 13, 2025 at Gossip Grill. (PHOTO BY BRITTANY CRUZ-FEJERAN/SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)

Jewish orgs set alternate J Pride Weekend amid Kehlani controversy

By DREW SITTON / Times of San Diego

For the individuals, including Mayor Todd Gloria, who have said they will not attend the San Diego Pride Festival over Kehlani's headlining show, there is now an alternate place to spend the afternoon after the Pride Parade on July 19.

They can head to the J Pride Festival starting at 2 p.m. in La Jolla at the Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center (JCC) Jacobs Family Campus.

The event includes kosher food trucks, live music, colorful crafts, games, art stations and community tie dye.

The free community event is being put on by prominent Jewish organizations like Temple Emanu-El, Congregation Beth Israel, the Jewish Community Foundation, Leichtag Foundation and Jewish Federation of San Diego.

The J Pride Festival is part of a new J Pride Weekend in support of LGBTQ+ people, both Jewish and not.

On its website, Lawrence Family JCC said this is a chance for the Jewish community to create something new that uplifts LGBTQ+ Jews and allies in a joyful space where everyone can feel seen, safe and proud.

"This is not just a reaction – it's a declaration. We believe in showing up not in anger, but in purpose. Not to retreat, but to rejoice. We are creating a celebration that honors who we are, the values we hold, and the future we're building together," the website reads.

In addition to a community festival on Saturday, J Pride Weekend includes a Shabbat service at 6:15 p.m. July 18 and The Big Gay Brunch at 10 a.m. July 20.

Already, J Pride has backing from Jamul Casino, which donated its $10,000 parade contingent costs to the event and is dropping out of the parade. In a statement, the casino said "Jamul Casino Resort's position is one that prioritizes its firm commitment to core values such as artistic freedom, equality, diversity and genuine respect for community concerns."

Jamul Casino is honoring its financial commitments to the San Diego Pride Festival, sponsoring The Movement stage which centers Black musicians and artists, but will not have a physical presence at the parade or festival.

The alternate pride festival emerged after outcry over San Diego Pride's Saturday headlining performer, Kehlani.

While advocating for Palestine's autonomy amid the war in Gaza, Kehlani has made inflammatory remarks.

Those leading the boycott point to statements such as "It's f— Israel, its f— Zionism" and "eradicate Zionism" as examples of antisemitism.

In San Diego, 91% of Jews said they believe Israel should exist in a 2022 community study, making a huge majority of the local Jewish population Zionist, according to opinion columnist Sara E. Brown.

Finest Community Coalition, made up of local Jewish organizations including the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) of San Diego, urged Pride to cancel the show in an open letter sent May 22. The coalition stated, "A celebration of one group should never come at the expense of another. There is no pride in exclusion."

Signers later dropped out of the festival after Pride did not reverse course.

A month later, the Antisemitism Task Force of San Diego at StandWithUs mounted a pressure campaign called "Pride, not Prejudice" that has so far not seen results from the Pride organization. The list, though, of corporations and nonprofits boycotting the event has grown.



Jamul Casino's float on July 15, 2023 in the San Diego Pride Parade. This year, the casino is using its $10,000 contingent cost as a donation to J Pride Weekend. (PHOTO BY DREW SITTON/TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)

Harrahs, Viejas, UC San Diego, UCSD Health, Meals on Wheels and Mamas Kitchen San Diego are among notable absentees. Some boycotters are choosing to participate in the festival, just not the parade, during a year where the LGBTQ+ community has faced national attacks. Others, like Jamul Casino, will not be at either.

Despite the controversy, San Diego Pride, the nonprofit which puts on the parade and festival, announced that ticket sales are outpacing previous years.

Pride's Interim Executive Director Kristin Flickinger told KPBS, "Whether someone wants to show up and celebrate or someone wants to show up and speak their mind in disagreement, it's really important that everyone shows up at this moment when our community is being silenced and erased."

The anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric from Washington and potential for protesters of Kehlani have prompted the organization to increase security, including a new clear bag policy for the festival, additional private security and the presence of legal observers to document interactions between law enforcement and protesters.

San Diego Pride Parade will be led by military contingent after all

By DREW SITTON / Times of San Diego

The San Diego Pride Parade will be led by military contingents once again – just not the same one as in the past decade.

San Diego Pride posted on social media that SPARTA Pride, a national nonprofit created by and for transgender people serving in the military, was partnering with them to organize a military presence for the parade.

The post recalled Pride beginning as a protest at the Stonewall Inn. "This year's march is not just a celebration – it's a stand for justice, visibility, and the right to serve and heal with dignity," Pride said.

The news came after the San Diego Pride's Military Department announced June 20 that it would withdraw from the parade over a myriad of safety concerns and a lack of support and communication from Pride leadership.

Department chair Lauren Henson, a United States Marine, in an interview cited surveillance of the marchers to out transgender service members and potential crowd reaction while Marines are deployed domestically in Los Angeles as safety concerns.

She, along with former chair Clay Kilpatrick, expressed frustration over a lack of year-round advocacy from the Pride organization for LGBTQ+ military members and veterans. Pride was notably absent from a press conference held by local LGBTQ+ leaders and organizations opposing the renaming of the USNS Harvey Milk.

"Pride has abdicated its leadership role as an advocacy group ... the silence is problematic," said Kilpatrick, who chaired the military department for a decade and continues to volunteer, in June.

Beyond just advocacy, Kilpatrick decried the lack of administrative support and timely communication for the military department from Pride, something Henson echoed.

In the Military Department social media post, Henson said San Diego Pride's diminished capacity has prevented the department "from communicating with its members to register and track its participants."

With Pride circumventing the department, military registration on the Pride website has begun anew.

Active duty, veteran, retired and military families were invited to come as they are to march — whether in uniform, rainbow gear or however they feel comfortable.

In a statement, Pride said, "While some members of the San Diego Pride Military Department will not be participating this year, military contingents will be marching in the parade, including members of SPARTA. All military personnel are welcome to join."

SPARTA did not respond to a request for comment.

This year's contingents will look different. The Marine Corps Band will not play due to Trump administration policies that target diversity, equity and inclusion. Department of Defense regulations could impact participants as well.

San Diego Pride was the first Pride celebration in the nation to have a military contingent march in 2011. The participation had become tradition with San Diego being home to one of the largest military communities in the nation.

Even amid President Donald Trump's discharge of transgender service members and cuts to VA healthcare that impact LGBTQ+ veterans, the tradition now will continue with the military contingent set to lead the parade at 10 a.m. July 19.


The 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing Band marches in the 2023 San Diego Pride Parade. Under current Department of Defense rules, the band is not allowed to use government resources, which include their instruments, at events promoting diversity, equity and inclusion like Pride parades and Black History Month celebrations. (PHOTO BY DREW SITTON/TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)

MARCH

CONTINUED FROM **Page 10**

crowd enthusiastically cheered for young transgender speakers and loudly booed recently implemented anti-trans restrictions, like the Trump administration's ban on transgender people in the military.

"The more authentic I've been, the better I've been able to serve my country, and I will not let them hide that or put me down or shun me for it," Paulo Batista, a transgender member of the Navy who's stationed in San Diego, told the crowd to cheers.

Since Trump entered office, conservative lawmakers across the nation have targeted the transgender community with nearly 1,000 pieces of legislation this year so far, according to the Trans Legislation Tracker.

Over 100 of them have become law — barring transgender people in some states from changing their gender on ID cards, using the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity in certain places and receiving gender-affirming medical care if they're under 18.

Herbert said he felt "fortunate" to live in California, where transgender people like him were less "vulnerable." But even in California, transgender people aren't immune to the flood of restrictions.

Five bills targeting transgender rights in education, child welfare and the prison system are currently moving through the California Legislature. Earlier this year, state lawmakers did strike down two bills that would ban transgender athletes from girls' and women's sports.

Amid the proposed rollbacks, Reckinwith said the march empowered the transgender community to do what the art of drag has always done — use humor, entertainment and joy as tools of resistance.

"We as drag artists, we know how to do this," Reckinwith said.

"We value joy and happiness, and the only route to that is recognizing that everybody's rights are equal."



Trevor Herbert, right, has flown the transgender flag at San Diego's Drag March every year to speak up for transgender people like him. (PHOTO BY MADELINE NGUYEN/TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)



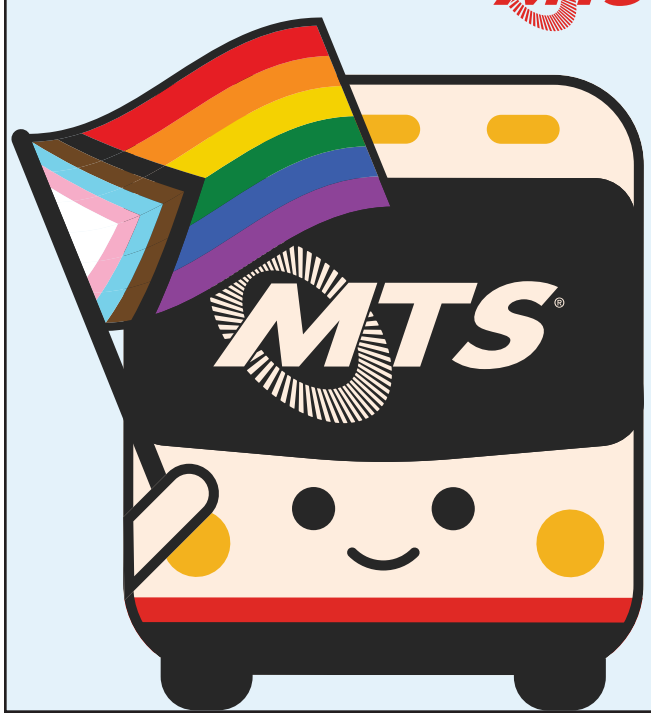
San Diego drag queen Sister Amanda Reckinwith, left, rallied marchers to champion "visibility" for transgender people as the march kicked off. "We are here for each other," Reckinwith told the crowd to applause. "That is the message." (PHOTO BY MADELINE NGUYEN/TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)



Demonstrators made and decorated posters in support of the transgender community for hours before the march at Hillcrest gay bar Urban MO's. (PHOTO BY MADELINE NGUYEN/TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)

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SPIRIT OF STONEWALL AWARDS

By DREW SITTON / Times of San Diego

CHAMPION OF PRIDE

Courtney Johnson creates space for POC in Hillcrest



Strawberry performs at the first Drag March for Trans Lives on June 18, 2023, an event she organizes annually. (PHOTO BY DREW SITTON/TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)

Courtney Johnson, also known through her drag persona Strawberry, received Pride's highest award this year.

Strawberry was named Champion of Pride for her ongoing work fundraising, advocating for trans women of color, and diversifying drag. She is known for changing the face of Hillcrest in the 10 years since she began performing.

Raised in Logan Heights, she moved to Hillcrest as she began transitioning and her drag career expanded.

Of the time, she said, "I didn't want to be a role model. I didn't want to be a pillar in the community. I just wanted to be a drag queen and have fun."

However, Strawberry found there "was not much for people of color in the LGBT Community." The divide between gay men and trans women in drag also bothered her.

To counter that, first she started hosting balls, then doing fundraisers for organizations like TransFamily Support Services.

She continued to organize new events, like Trans Girl Magic – drag shows with all trans performers – and more recently the annual Drag March for Trans Lives. She produces Stunt Sundays at Rich's, which has invited in a diverse queer crowd for a night of dancing each week.

A decade since Strawberry first took the stage, the 34-year-old aims to open the community to the upcoming generation. Johnson is happy to see young trans people move freely on the streets of Hillcrest.

"The new generation has me excited, because when I joined the LGBT scene here in Hillcrest, I didn't feel seen. I didn't feel respected by the older generation," she said.

One member of the older generation has become her auntie and mentor, though: Tracie Jada O'Brien.

The elder Black trans woman has thanked Johnson for continuing to fight for LGBTQ+ rights after O'Brien has spent more than 50 years in the same fight. "With her saying, 'Now I can rest,' that lets me know that I'm doing my job and I'm doing my job right," Johnson said.

Receiving a Spirit of Stonewall Award also confirms to Johnson that her year-round advocacy is effective and necessary. "I don't want to sound like a superhero, but I feel like the city needs me," the lifelong San Diego resident said.

The award harkening back to the Stonewall riots is also meaningful for her.

"Stonewall ... has gotten its popularity because of a Black trans woman, a Latina trans woman. And I am a Black trans woman and I felt like it's my job and my duty to... hold up that legacy," Johnson said. "[Being Champion of Pride] feels correct. And I feel like it's a badge of honor."

COMMUNITY GRAND MARSHAL

Marching at the front of the Pride parade 'a big step' for LGBTQ+ immigrants



Jamie Arangure and other women involved with nonprofit Proyecto Trans Latinas dance folklórico in the San Diego Pride Parade on July 16, 2022.. (PHOTO BY DREW SITTON/TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)

Each year, San Diego Pride chooses a community to serve as grand marshals.

Near the front of the parade, they are cheered on for their year-round advocacy for the community, like with librarians and educators last year who stood up for LGBTQ+ youth amid book bans, forced outing policies and other attacks.

This year, the parade will be led by LGBTQ+ migrants and defenders.

"For me and our community, I think this is a big step," said Jamie Arangure, founder of Proyecto Trans Latinas. "I think it's really more important, double important, with this administration when we are under attack, specifically immigrant community and trans community."

She said for decades the immigrant trans community struggled to connect to services and were not thought about by other LGBTQ+ organizations. "We were struggling, all the girls," Arangure said.

She founded PTL with seven other women to help a marginalized group pushed to the edges of the community due to being undocumented, not knowing English and doing survival sex work.

They found resources for them and advocated with healthcare providers to improve their treatment. PTL brings workshops to all parts of San Diego, not just Hillcrest, to teach skills like first aid after an attack, beauty tutorials and more.

"We empower our community," she said.

Arangure said many trans migrants are afraid right now as national rhetoric has emboldened the worst parts of society. "The administration gives them, the society, the excuse to [do] violent acts and to discriminate," she said.

Leading the parade is meaningful for a community that needs more support.

"It is really important, now they are looking at us," Arangure said. In addition to PTL, other nonprofits Border Angels, Haitian Bridge Alliance and Transgenero 2000 will be in the community grand marshal contingent.

"It is really important, now they are looking at us," Arangure said. In addition to PTL, other nonprofits Border Angels, Haitian Bridge Alliance and Transgenero 2000 will be in the community grand marshal contingent.

PTL is a small organization with a low budget. Arangure dreams of opening a shelter for older trans women immigrants so they can retire from sex work and have a better life. "We have a lot of work to do," she said.

Despite a lack of resources and targeting of the community, Arangure holds strong.

"Discrimination cannot stop us."

SPIRIT OF STONEWALL SERVICE

Once on the fringes of the community, Pride recognizes the Bears



Bears San Diego members stand in front of the flagpole in Hillcrest with the bear flag raised. The social organization received the Community Service award from Pride this year. (PHOTO BY SPENCER PABLO/BEARS SAN DIEGO)

Bears San Diego was recognized for over 30 years of fundraising and volunteering with the Spirit of Stonewall Service Award.

Through tons of annual events, they have raised thousands for nonprofits like Special Delivery San Diego, which prepares and delivers meals to people with life-threatening illnesses.

The social and service organization Bears San Diego was founded in 1994 by five individuals who felt left out of the mainstream gay community because they did not look like the twinks or muscle people, according to Bears treasurer Donnie Vella.

Members joked the group was an island of misfit toys.

"It was established by five individuals who felt that they needed a group where they can be together with other like-minded individuals... They felt more like they belonged there... They wouldn't be judged based on their body style or the way they looked," Vella said. "The Bears have always welcomed anybody."

Today, the club has grown to over 75 members.

They have events at least once or twice a week like bowling, karaoke nights and barbecues. Through annual fundraisers like the chili cook off or mac n cheese contest, the group has raised thousands for charity.

The Bears host a contest each year for title holders who represent them in the community and direct some of their work.

This year, both titleholders are transgender so much of their volunteering has focused on raising funds for organizations like Trans Lifeline. Mr. San Diego Bear 2025 Jimmy Trimble and the new non-gendered

title Leather Bear, won by Trimble's partner Gio, have helped the Bears find out the needs of local trans organizations and help to meet them.

After decades of feeling left out of the most visible parts of the LGBTQ+ community, the organization is thrilled to win an award from Pride, one of the largest local LGBTQ+ nonprofits in the area.

"To be recognized by Pride after all of these years, it means a lot," Vella said.

JULIA LEGASPI TRANS LEADERSHIP AWARD

New award named for trans elder given to rising trans leader



Bliss Vasquez tables for Gender Enders Meet at a zine fest. (PHOTO COURTESY BLISS VASQUEZ)

Bliss Vasquez is the inaugural winner of the Julia Legaspi Trans Leadership Award.

The new honor is named after the late Legaspi, who died this April at age 71 after decades as a pillar of the San Diego LGBTQ+ community. She was a proud Filipina transgender immigrant who served with many nonprofits as well as on the human rights commission of both the city and county. Her appointment made her the first transgender person appointed to public office in San Diego and only the third in the nation.

27-year-old Vasquez works at the San Diego LGBT Community Center leading the transgender and nonbinary service program.

Outside of their day job, they run Gender Enders Meet (GEM), an online space for queer people founded in 2021. It gives isolated members of the community, whether that be because they live in a rural place or they are immunocompromised, a chance to make friends in all their eccentricity.

"[Fighting transphobia is] an uphill battle, but… I feel fueled by the joys that I get to experience, and living my most authentic self and being with other transgender, queer people," Vasquez said.

Vasquez is much younger than Legaspi but in many ways is similar to the award's namesake.

Both were deeply spiritual people who radiate kindness to those around them. The two may not be the loudest advocates in any space but quietly served others, accomplishing much.

I only met Legaspi once in the wake of the county human rights commission failing to pass a statement denouncing transphobia after a heated discussion in which a fellow commissioner and faith leader called trans people an "abomination." Legaspi was shaken and teary after the incident, but still generous as she spoke to me.

The comments were all too familiar to Vasquez. Other than lack of housing, they see poor treatment as the top issue facing San Diego's transgender community. "We need people's attitudes towards trans people to get better and their attitude just towards difference period needs to improve," Vasquez said.

Housing and discrimination can be connected though.

As a former frontline caseworker, Vasquez has seen it play out. "People applying for jobs or… going in person to apply for an apartment, getting turned away as soon as they get looked upon. That is so disgusting and ridiculous," he said.

Growing up in Southeast San Diego, Vasquez thought the only life paths for queer people was to live in Hillcrest, be a drag performer or to be homeless. Meeting a queer librarian in high school was life changing.

Their own career path has been difficult, with issues getting job interviews and a CEO at a local nonprofit saying if Vasquez could not get used to being misgendered, they needed to find another job.

They also know even if a trans person is receiving accolades or appears successful, they may still be struggling to access gender-affirming healthcare or make ends meet. Despite the emotional and economic toll of being openly trans, Vasquez continues to fight for their community in practical ways but also through joy and connection.

"I feel grateful just to be alive in that moment, because I know that so many of our trans (people) don't get to have that moment or that there are just people out there who don't want us to have joy, who want to see us dead," Vasquez said. "That hate fuels me… I'm living out of spite."

LIGHT OF PRIDE

Pastor Dan Koeshall shines authentically



Pastor Dan Koeshall has served at The Met for 26 years. He is set to retire in a few months. (PHOTO COURTESY PASTOR DAN KOESHALL)

The Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) denomination was founded in 1968, prior to Stonewall, as an affirming, safe spiritual home for LGBTQ+ people, making it one of the oldest running LGBTQ+ organizations in the nation.

The Metropolitan Community Church San Diego, known as The Met, was founded in 1970 as a church by queer people for queer people. It became the first LGBTQ+ organization in the region to own property.

Today it meets weekly in Bay Park under the leadership of Pastor Dan Koeshall, who has served in some capacity at the church for 26 years.

Koeshall was named this year's Light of Pride. The award coincides with the 10th anniversary of Light up the Cathedral, the interfaith Pride service hosted by St. Paul's Cathedral in Bankers Hill where the award is handed out.

As Koeshall prepares to retire in a few months, receiving the Light of Pride award, which is given out to a spiritual leader who advocates for the LGBTQ+ community, is a sweet sendoff to his life's work.

"I hope that our light, my light, has helped others through the years," Koeshall said in a phone call. "When we are ourselves, we can shine."

Beyond his work at the church, he has served on the LGBT Advisory Board to the Sheriff's Department and San Diego Police Department.

Before trans women were integrated into the general population, they were housed in the medical wing of the jail where Koeshall learned the pastors visiting them were not affirming.

"The spiritual people that were coming to them were giving them services like, 'God loves you, but you got to change.' And we just said, 'That is harmful,'" Koeshall said.

He began organizing his own congregation to host weekly services for transgender prisoners where they could have their proper names and pronouns used while being treated with respect.

Koehsall knows the damage nonaffirming religious teachings can do. Twice he went through a 22-week course at Exodus International, a defunct Christian conversion therapy program. A year of their program left damage it took a decade to heal.

Following his failed conversion therapy, he came out and got kicked out from his longtime faith community. After he was excommunicated, he found out about MCC in a book. Afraid of being tracked, he drove to a car wash phone booth to call them and find out how to get connected. At The Met, he found a community that accepted him.

"I'm just so grateful to be my authentic self. Because I've gone through that experience, it's really important for me for people to, no matter what they've gone through, to realize that they are wonderfully created. There is no mistake. They are God's children… I really strive for people to be comfortable in their authentic self," Koeshall said.

The late nights, phone banks, sweat and work as a pastor have all been worth it to him because this award shows he made a difference.

He described being part of San Diego's LGBTQ+ community as "the joy of a lifetime."

INSPIRING RELATIONSHIP

Lesbian couple with passion for volunteering



Julie Hoffman and Summer White at an evening out. (PHOTO COURTESY SUMMER WHITE)

Julie Hoffman and Summer White are being recognized for their inspiring relationship at this year's Pride festivities, which coincides with the 40 year anniversary of when they first got together on June 8, 1985.

The two were at lesbian bar Calamities after a Pride Parade, back when San Diego still held it in June, when Hoffman began looking at White across the room. A jealous acquaintance tried to talk her out of approaching White.

Hoffman said, "She started reading me all these things about Summer that she thought was gonna turn me off. And everything she said, it's like, 'I like that. I like that. I like that too.' So (White) comes over to me and she says, 'Is she bothering you?' I said, 'Yeah.' (Summer) gave me a big old kiss. She said, 'You want to go to my house?'"

The two left together and have been dating ever since.

Fulfilling the U-Haul stereotype of many lesbian couples, they moved in together three weeks later.

White described Hoffman as the light of her life while Hoffman said of her partner, "I cannot imagine my life without Summer. She completes every piece of me absolutely. I'm extremely lucky to have found somebody that tolerates me."

Part of what makes their relationship work, Hoffman said, is having bad habits align.

Some might only look to the good but not fighting about bad habits can be more important, she said.

"We shared a checkbook and money since the day we met, but she has her drawers and spaces in the house, and I have mine. And mine are gorgeous and organized, and hers are hers," Hoffman said.

For the past three decades, they have lived in a house in University Heights with separate closets but a shared bed.

In addition to years as season ticket holders for the Chargers, they spent their time with such organizations as the gay rodeo, the Imperial Court and San Diego Leather Girls, but most of all volunteering.

"Our biggest thing and passion that we do has always been volunteering. Since we got together right before the AIDS crisis, by 1988 there was, unfortunately, a need for volunteering, and so we really jumped on that," White said. Since she is chronically ill with lupus, volunteering also gives her flexibility that a job wouldn't.

Hoffman worked as an RN in HIV care for 30 years.

Today she volunteers at Ivy Pharmacy where occasionally men she has treated for decades come in, having survived a period where the couple sometimes went to five funerals a week. "It's fun to see the old timers," Hoffman said.

The pair endured the epidemic with support from each other, as even the community they sought to help turned on them.

For a time, the two stopped going out because, as the charge nurse for Dr. Keith Vhrel, patients would accost Hoffman if they were not getting the experimental drugs they wanted or were sickening.

White recalled dropping off condoms at bar bathrooms only for the staff to yell at them for reminding people about a disease when they were trying to have fun.

"I don't care. I'm here to save lives," White said.

Decades later, White is proud some of their work is now widespread. Bars carry condoms, Narcan and drink covers to improve the safety of customers.

Instead of condoms, the two now carry Narcan in case someone overdoses and often spare food items to give to people in need. Beyond volunteering, helping people whenever they can is part of their ethos. Any extra money is given to charity or friends struggling.

"It's just what you do," White said. "I hope somebody would do that for me."

Receiving the Inspiring Relationship Award from Pride encourages the two to keep going, both in serving their community and in dedication to each other.

"It's inspiring in itself, to have us keep going," White said.

LARRY T. BAZA ARTS & CULTURE

Drag queen Jackette Knightley fundraises for the community

Drag queen Jackette Knightley won Pride's arts and culture award named after late arts booster Larry T. Baza.



Jackette Knightley wrote her original song "Together You and Me Strong" during President Trump's inauguration to unite communities. (PHOTO COURTESY JACKETTE KNIGHTLEY MUSIC)

It's the latest of many accolades she has received in the past five years for her work as a fundraiser.

A doctor by day and performer by night, the Los Angeles-based artist produces shows and music dedicated to many causes. She was at Urban Mo's this year at a charity event which matched the name of the song she released in January, "Together You and Me Strong." Both the song and event raised money for undocumented victims of the Los Angeles fireswho are now at risk of deportation.

She wrote the song during U.S. President Donald Trump's inauguration while the fires raged outside in an effort to unite communities. It's just the latest example of her responding to anxiety-inducing political situations with art that brings joy as well as raises funds to address those issues.

She started her work in 2020 when many drag performers were out of work due to the pandemic.

She knew advocacy became a big part of the drag scene in the '80s during the HIV epidemic when shows turned into community fundraisers for people suffering.

"COVID really mirrored that," she said in a phone interview.

She produced online shows while forming the group Queens and Kings for Causes. Funds helped different causes but also kept the performers employed. She hoped to reach new audiences as people sought hope amid their isolation.

When she could not find the music she wanted to perform to, she began creating her own upbeat dance hits. Each month, proceeds from her songs and shows go to a different cause.

She has also advocated at city council meetings in areas opposed to Pride celebrations, bringing her work across Southern California.

Despite threats, she said "Visibility is crucial."

To follow her events and shows, find her on Instagram at: @JacketteKnightly.

Hate crime fund boosts Hillcrest volunteers



San Diego Police Department Captain Matt Dobbs addresses a press conference about hate crime vandalism on Thursday, June 5 in Hillcrest. Behind him, stand (l to r) Deputy District Attorney Abigail Dillon, District Attorney Summer Stephan and Hillcrest Business Association Executive Director Ben Nicholls (obscured). (PHOTO BY DREW SITTON/TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)

By DREW SITTON / Times of San Diego

HILLCREST – "Today we're going to tell you the good end of the terrible story," said District Attorney (DA) Summer Stephan on Thursday, June 5. The tale began with a hate crime.

Last summer, 18 trash cans with "Welcome to Hillcrest" signs, three painted utility boxes, two businesses' exterior walls and a mural in mural alley were defaced with swastikas and anti-gay slurs. Stephan condemned the incident as not just property damage, but one that spread shame, fear and disrespect through an entire community.

"It's something that lingers in the back of your head that you're not even safe at home," said Patric Stillman, who owns art gallery Studio Door along mural alley.

Months later, Stephan was back in the historic LGBTQ+ neighborhood to announce that in a plea deal for the misdemeanor hate crime vandalism charge, the perpetrators paid $2,477 towards a restitution fund.

The individuals were also ordered to complete LGBTQ+ education classes and forbidden from entering the area. They remain on probation.

"This was the just result, and a result that was also balanced by the idea of their youth and the potential ability to rehabilitate them and have them be members of the community that do not hate," said Stephan, at Thursday's news conference, held at University and Fifth avenues. The event served as a preview of the new community restoration fund for Hillcrest.

The Hillcrest Business Association will use the funds to support volunteer efforts to clean up the neighborhood, including the quarterly Hillcrest Cleanup & Cocktails. The fund can cover expenses like trash bags and gloves.

"Last year's event in August is when we found some of those hate symbols that are being mentioned, and I was so proud to our community that they decided to stand up. They took pictures. We reported it with our LGBT liaisons, and they scrubbed the hell out of those hate signs, because hate does not belong in Hillcrest," said Rick Cervantes, who co-leads the Cleanup & Cocktails event.

In August, the graffiti was in place for less than 24 hours as volunteers mobilized to scrub away the shoe polish spread throughout the neighborhood. Painters were hired to fix the murals.

"This community has certainly been under attack in a big picture way. But as this case shows in a small picture — graffiti tags and pellet guns and all sorts of things like that — have really brought us a level of fear," said Hillcrest Business Association Executive Director Ben Nicholls, also referring to the pellet gun shootings that took place last fall.

"The way that the community responds to that is by showing up, participating, getting involved," he said.

Strength and resilience despite graffiti

As a former Hillcrest resident, Deputy DA Abigail Dillon said the quick response from the community to the incident showed its strength and resilience. "I can't emphasize enough what a testament it is to the community that so many people came out and made sure that attention was brought to this. So many of these crimes just go unreported, and if they go unreported, they never reach our office for prosecution."

Dillon led the prosecution and worked alongside San Diego Police Department in the investigation. As the head of the DA's hate crimes division, she noted 2024 saw an increase in hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community. They tied, for the first time she can remember, with race-motivated hate crimes.

The DA does not track hate crimes by neighborhood but Hillcrest saw at least a handful of anti-LGBTQ+ hate incidents in 2024. In addition to the graffiti and drive-by pellet shootings of pedestrians. a possible bullet hit the window of a nonprofit serving transgender immigrants.

Capt. Matt Dobbs, who commands the SDPD's Western Division, said the individuals responsible for the graffiti would not have been found without smart street light cameras and license plate readers installed in the neighborhood following other hate incidents.

"I know that some recent events in the nation and some rhetoric have left some in the community feeling erased and disenfranchised," said Dobbs. "I want them to know that the San Diego Police Department sees them. We hear them, but most importantly, we are here for them."



Rainbow Hillcrest signs on trash cans were one of the targets of the swastika and slur graffiti last August.. (PHOTO BY DREW SITTON/TIMES OF SAN DIEGO)

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