

Anne Arundel Caucus of African American Leaders highlights toll of discrimination on LGBTQ+ youth



Chris Haley, Director of the Study of the Legacy of Slavery in Maryland at the Maryland State Archives, leads a conversation with, left to right, Joe Toolan, Janye Walters, Taylor Lewis and Mariah Davis. (Bridget Byrne/Staff photo)



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Annapolis LGBTQ+ activists discussed youth safety, mental health and more with the Anne Arundel Caucus of African American Leaders on Tuesday in a packed room at the Wiley H. Bates Legacy Center in Annapolis.

Chris Haley, Director of the Study of the Legacy of Slavery in Maryland at the Maryland State Archives and nephew of “Roots: The Saga of an American Family” author Alex Haley, led the panel.

“Remember when you ‘other’ others — the gays, the Blacks, the Jews, the immigrants — you ‘other’ yourself,” Haley said. “Today’s session is an effort to suggest that we move closer to seeing your neighbor not as an ‘other’ or a category, but as just another person.”

The panel was made up of Joe Toolan, board chair of Annapolis Pride; Janye Walters, an Anne Arundel County librarian; Taylor Lewis, a University of Maryland PhD candidate and organizer with The Coalition for LGBTQ+ Students; and Mariah Davis, an environmental justice officer for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.



At the request of Annapolis Pride, which was formed in 2018, Mayor Gavin Buckley declared June LGBTQ+ Pride month for the first time in the city’s history and announced the first Annapolis Pride parade in 2019.

“Six years later, the Pride event is one of our largest events,” said Keven Simmons, Director of the Office of Emergency Management, as he introduced the panel. “This experience led me to a lot of questions.”



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On a screen behind the panel, definitions of LGBTQ+ terms flashed. The panel answered seemingly simple questions like “What do all those letters mean?” and “Why are pronouns important?”

“Pronouns are a replacement for your name, so if somebody is misgendering you, they are calling you out of your name,” Lewis explained. “Nobody wants to be treated that way, and nobody wants to be harmed in that way.”

The panelists shared their experiences living in Anne Arundel County, emphasizing that the county is not completely safe. Walters said she fled to Maryland from Indiana, her wife's lifelong home. Indiana was recently ranked as [one of the least welcoming states for LGBTQ+ people](#).

“Indiana is no longer safe. Maryland is safer. It's not perfectly safe, but it is much better,” Walters said.

The group pointed out that even downtown Annapolis, known for its progressive politics, can be hostile.

“I was downtown on Main Street with two of my friends, just looking at the Pride flags,” Toolan said. “Somebody drove by and yelled the f-slur out the window at us.”

“As a gay man who's also a person of color, there are a lot of other things we face as people of color, even here in Annapolis,” Toolan added. “As the chair of Annapolis Pride, I don't always feel comfortable at some of our events because it's a lot of white people.”

LGBTQ+ people often face struggles such as hostility from family or difficulty finding an unbiased doctor.

The challenges of growing up while struggling with identity can contribute to high levels of mental health issues in the LGBTQ+ community. Fourteen percent of LGBTQ+ youth in Maryland attempted suicide in 2022, according to the Maryland Department of Education.

“I know if you're a parent in this room, that thought probably scares you, and it should, because you need to be there for your queer kids, otherwise you might lose them,” Toolan said.

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