

Pride flag ripped from Annapolis tattoo shop highlights tension in area: 'People feel more bold to be openly rude'



capitalgazette.com/2024/11/24/dapper-dog-tattoo-lgbtq-pride-flag-hate-crime

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November 24, 2024



Three blocks along Maryland Avenue separate the State House from a push gate into the Naval Academy. There are 18 flags between them. Many celebrate the state, others the country. Some advertise sales and one, with a grand "N," serves well as a walkup to the service academy.

One, however, has been ripped from its post — three times.

Charlie Garrett, the founder and co-owner of the Dapper Dog Tattoo Shop, placed a rainbow flag above his store in 2021, not long after opening. The same display hung outside the home he shares with his partner Gene in Southern Maryland, but the words stretched across it, "ABIDE NO HATRED," were an ideal Garrett hoped to build into his business.



The Pride flag outside the Dapper Dog Tattoo Shop was put back up Thursday, less than a week after it was torn down and thrown in the trash. (Charlie Garrett/Courtesy)

"I'm not here to try to change the world," Garrett said. "But I don't ever want anybody else to feel those feelings that I have felt in the past."

Born in Texas, Garrett, 47, entered the tattoo industry during his time in San Francisco, where he lived for 10 years as a painter. Yet even there, Garrett said he encountered intolerance: customers, collaborators and other artists who were unaccepting of gay life.

Fleeing the West Coast's high costs, he landed in Maryland in 2019 with the goal of opening his own shop. It would be a place where anyone felt welcome.

Yes, as a gay artist, Garrett said the rainbow flag was a signal of pride. But as a person, if it could disarm or nurture a customer, someone using their body to memorialize something or empower themselves, it needed to be there.

"It seems so trivial," he said in an interview. "People don't look at [tattoos] as a way for people to heal and grow. We do."

The first time someone tore down the store's Pride flag, about a year after it went up, Garrett and his co-owner Chris Ingles didn't know who was responsible. When it happened again, they were still at a loss.

So, Garrett bought a security camera and placed it in his front window, somewhere near a skeleton and a model airplane, and pointed it at the now-heightened post.

On Nov. 15, around 1 a.m., it captured someone in a black vest and patterned button-down shirt walk past the store. Reaching up, the man palmed the base of the flag and slashed it downward, taking the pole and splintering its mount.

Later that morning, [Garrett found the flag in the shop's trash can](#). The dump truck was late picking it up, he said.

Ingles, who got involved with Dapper Dog after a 22-year career in the Navy, walked around the city showing businesses their security photo, while word spread quickly online. Soon, a tip led police to identify Benjamin Michael as a suspect, charging him with two misdemeanors the next day. One of them was a hate crime.



The location of the flag was mounted 10-feet from the ground. It had been relocated about a foot higher than it's original mounting after the first time it was torn down. The Dapper Dog Tattoo shop in Annapolis, was the target of a hate crime after a Naval Academy graduate and Marine veteran ripped a pride flag off its front awning.

(Jeffrey F. Bill/Staff)

Detectives said Michael, 44, came from his home in Dallas to watch that weekend's Navy football game. A 2004 graduate of the Annapolis academy, Michael served in the Marines from 2004 to 2013 and, according to the Corps, was recognized several times for his performance in combat.

Michael, who was recently fired from his job as a marketing executive, is scheduled to return to Annapolis for a Jan. 3 trial, according to the Maryland Judiciary. His attorney, Caroline Norman Frost, did not respond to requests for comment.

The same rallying online that led to Michael's arrest has bolstered Dapper Dog's business, Garrett said. Police and political leaders have made themselves available to the shop and Garrett said consultation requests have tripled.

"I couldn't have asked for anything better to come out of a crappy situation," Garrett said. The flag was rehung above the store Friday.

The latest incident at Dapper Dog comes at a time when hate crimes involving someone's sexuality are on the rise — a nearly 70% jump in 2023 compared to the five-year average preceding it, according to the FBI.

Beneath the jurisdiction of the courts, however, the conversations inundating the LGBTQ+ community have made "showing up" anywhere difficult for its members, said Annapolis Pride Board Chair Joe Toolan.

"People feel more bold to be openly rude to members of our community right now," Toolan said. "I think some of it is the federal rhetoric and so, we really need to find those spaces in Annapolis where people can come and just be themselves."

Hours after poll projections called President Donald Trump's reelection, Annapolis Pride held an event at a restaurant in Eastport, Toolan said, with about 40 people.

The division in the United States, he said, has put LGBTQ+ residents "more on edge than we have been in the past."

Trump's campaign, as well as those of down-ballot Republicans across the nation, centralized anti-transgender themes and proposals. According to the media tracking firm AdImpact, throughout the general election, the Republican Party aired 69,000 advertisements concerning LGBTQ+ rights, while the Democrats broadcast none.

In a survey conducted by the State of Maryland Commission for LGBTQIA+ Affairs, which Toolan first chaired, advocates said they were most worried about the implications of Trump's presidency on their marriage equality, health care access and legal protections.

Toolan said Annapolis Pride is in "listening mode," trying to figure out where it can best support its community.

The steps some states have taken to ensure protections for their vulnerable citizens have been a source of hope for Toolan. For instance, despite a "rocky start," he said Maryland [putting gender-affirming care under its Medicaid system](#) last year has made it a more welcoming place for LGBTQ+ people to live.

"For better or worse, I think it's in the darkest times that people are able to come together and figure out what's next and what it will look like moving forward," he said.

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