

Creating Inclusive Spaces: Annapolis Pride



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Written By [Mary Katherine sullivan](#)



Photo courtesy of the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay

Every June, the nation comes together to celebrate and honor the 1969 Stonewall Riots in Manhattan, New York, which were a tipping point for the Gay Liberation Movement in the United States. This is why the last Sunday in June was initially celebrated as “Gay Pride Day,” and in major cities across the U.S. the day soon grew to encompass a month-long series of events. Today, LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) Pride Month celebrations include pride parades, picnics, parties, workshops, symposiums and concerts, and attract millions of participants around the world. Memorials are held during this month for those members of the community who have been lost to hate crimes or HIV/AIDS. The purpose of the commemorative month is to recognize the impact that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals have had on history locally, nationally, and internationally.

Last June, the City of Annapolis made headlines when Mayor Gavin Buckley [signed a proclamation](#) declaring June as the city's first LGBTQ+ Pride Month. We sat down with Jeremy Browning, the founder of [Annapolis Pride](#) and staff member of the [Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay](#), to ask a few questions about his experience working with the city to embrace diversity and to bring pride to Annapolis.

Why was it so important to establish Annapolis Pride Month and the Annapolis Pride Organization?

"It's really important because, while there are 600,000 plus people living in Anne Arundel County, there has been no organization to bring people together around Pride like other cities do. We wanted to create a central meeting space for the LGBTQ+ community, which is important for visibility and awareness for those who feel alone and isolated – those who do not feel welcome. The hope is to build a community of shared resources and safe spaces as well as a calendar of events to promote. We want to be a bridge between the LGBTQ+ community and local businesses to include events where everyone can get involved."

What does the acknowledgment of our local LGBTQ+ community mean for all of us?

"It is a huge deal that the mayor and local government acknowledge that harassment and discrimination cannot be tolerated. This is a powerful message. They recognize that we are marginalized. By acknowledging the existence of the LGBTQ+ community within our society, we acknowledge the impact LGBTQ+ individuals have on community businesses and the overall structure of Annapolis. As a marginalized group, it is important that we have the support of the establishment and the police force to truly validate our place in Annapolis culture."

Did you all face any struggles or resistance in the mandating of Annapolis Pride Month?

"Thankfully, no. A letter was sent in May asking if the City of Annapolis would declare June as pride month and we got a call back two hours later with full support. We've already received feedback on social media that so far Pride Month has been well received and everyone has been very supportive. We recently experienced some ignorance, with folks making comments like "you already have gay marriage what else do you need," but people who are not a part of the LGBTQ+ community may not know what it's like in the day of a life of a LGBTQ+ person and that it takes extra support to bring equality to marginalized groups. So far, we are very grateful that there are been no strong resistance."

Are you surprised by how Annapolis Pride has been received?

"Very surprised, but Gavin has been a long time supporter of the LGBTQ+ community. The letter was sent just days before Pride month started in June. It felt like they were ready. They called back in two hours and June 19, 2018 was decided as the proclamation party. Everyone wanted to make a big splash so we hosted it somewhere local versus City Hall. Claire Drapeau, a seventh-grader at Crofton Middle School planned the Pride Walk with the city. I was delighted that they were so supportive. In the past there was resistance, but I think that if Gavin wasn't Mayor we would be facing more, but that's also hard to say, because when we were first speaking to the Mayor's office I was thinking very small scale and they were the ones who pushed for a parade and festival next year. "We want all people here to feel welcome" they told us."

What do you look forward to most about Annapolis Pride Month in 2019?

"We look forward to bringing the entire community together, not just LGBTQ+—allies, the community, businesses, and all Annapolitans celebrating as one. There are a lot of LGBTQ+ people in Annapolis, but in the past they have had to go to DC or Baltimore in more urban areas to find hubs of the LGBTQ+ community and we hope that this makes it possible for them to feel they do not need to leave to find somewhere to belong. We are excited to host and promote events, as well as to see other organizations create and share their events. We want local businesses to see that this is the right thing to do. Now that this month is more established, we can also make things more out and colorful in 2019, with many more rainbow flags next year. We are excited for youth, transgender and minority people to come together in 2019."

There is not a central meeting place in Anne Arundel County, no "gayborhood" and no designated gay friendly area. I wouldn't feel comfortable walking down Main Street holding hands with my partner. Many people I've spoken to share the same sentiment. By creating events, picnics, and visibility, there is a truly safe space for the LGBTQ+ community."

What kind of future do you envision of the LGBTQ+ community of Annapolis? Do you hope this will affect LGBTQ+ youth growing up in Annapolis? How?

"In summer 2017, I saw a rainbow flag at the St. Luke's Church in Eastport, and that was the first rainbow flag I had ever noticed in Annapolis. Why is that the first one we've seen here? It's now 2018, so you'd think there would be more by now. There were challenges in my personal and professional life as a gay man encountering those who might not be open to people with a lifestyle like mine. I thought it would be great to have a pride in Annapolis, so I started laying the ground work. At the end of May, we launched a [Facebook group](#) that now has over 3,300 followers in short amount of time, and through this community we are already planning for 2019.

We like the idea of "one Annapolis" where we are all together and we are all equal - no matter your race, sexual or gender identity. We hope that one day we won't need a pride and that feeling equal and welcomed will become interwoven in society.

This Annapolis Pride movement is the most important for Queer and questioning youth/adults. Through visibility, they may realize they are not alone. The more resources that are available in schools and communities, the more comfortable queer and questioning youth they will be exploring and accepting themselves. Growing up here, there was nothing, and a lot of people still feel isolated and alone. I want them now to grow up knowing we have resources here. Someone who is 15 or 16 might not be able to go to more urban areas and discover a Queer community they can join, so we must make their hometown safe and accommodating.

There is no time like the present – and the rights that the LGBTQ+ community has worked so hard for could be taken away. Minorities are always at risk when the majority decides their rights. We cannot just be complacent and think that everything will be fine when there are people actively working against everything we have created. It is important that we stay vigilant and active in our community."

How receptive has your workplace been to Annapolis Pride?



Photo courtesy of Annapolis Pride



Photo courtesy of Annapolis Pride

"The Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay has been very supportive of Annapolis Pride, even providing free meeting space. Our Executive Director, Kate Fritz, is a strong ally and truly understands the importance of inclusive and safe spaces. It was Kate's idea to put the rainbow flag on the corner for Pride Month. This really touched my heart and made me even more proud to be a part of the Alliance family. We need strong allies and increased visibility. The rainbow flag is a symbol of inclusiveness. As a society we have made leaps and bounds to gaining equality, but the LGBTQ+ community still faces discrimination and harassment."

What advice would you give other organizations who are looking to

create safe spaces for LGBTQ people?

"Be a leader, be an ally. If you support equal rights, be vocal, be visible. Show your support. Invite LGBTQ+ staff, members, partners, allies to share their thoughts. Ask what your organization and community needs. When Kate Fritz, said we should put a rainbow flag out on the corner, I was nervous. I didn't know what the reaction would be. Before we put the flag up, I asked Kate if she had any concerns about upsetting board members or sponsors and she said, without hesitation, "No, I'm not concerned because it is the right thing to do". Stand up for those who may not be strong enough to stand up for themselves. Inclusiveness and equity for all is not just the right thing to do, it also makes organizations and communities stronger. Don't let fear stop you from doing what is right."



Photo courtesy of Annapolis Pride

Jeremy Browning is the development and executive administrative assistant in the Maryland & DC Office of the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay.

[Mary Katherine sullivan](#)