

*“Escape” by artist Robert Riedel*



# COME OUT

ST. PETE

INAUGURAL

## COME OUT ST. PETE EVENT GUIDE

OCTOBER 7 - 15, 2017

**Grand Central District & Surrounding Areas | [ComeOUTStPete.org](http://ComeOUTStPete.org)**

(1600-3100 Central Avenue, St. Pete)

# COME OUT MISSION



## COMING OUT OF THE CLOSET AND INTO THE WORLD!

Come Out St. Pete's mission is to inspire the LGBTQ+ community to live genuinely, raise awareness of LGBTQ+ issues and encourage public support from LGBTQ+ allies. Equality is at the forefront of all COSP initiatives and events, specifically in regard to sexual orientation and gender identity.

## HISTORY OF THE GRAND CENTRAL DISTRICT ASSOCIATION



The Grand Central District is a designated and accredited Main Street by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and a member of Florida Main Street. Grand Central is the longest tenured Main Street district in St. Petersburg as its 20<sup>th</sup> year is on the horizon. After suffering a drastic economic decline in the 1980s, the Grand Central District has become a thriving community full of interesting shops, arts and craft studios, professional and personal services, health and wellness providers, local breweries and a variety of restaurants and bars.

Grand Central is bordered by the two distinct and unique neighborhoods of Palmetto Park and Historic Kenwood, whose residents support collaboration on artistic endeavors and issues concerning the business corridor. Grand Central has also provided a safe space for the LGBT community for over two decades and was instrumental in creating one of the largest celebrations of the LGBT community in the southeast United States. With more than 80 LGBT-owned and/or managed companies in the District, the area harbors one of the highest concentrations of such businesses in the country.

St. Petersburg was designated City of the Arts following the Great Recession. Art studios and galleries are visible throughout the entire area. The arts community is woven into the fabric of Grand Central as it is now home to the ever increasing building murals that have become part of the St. Petersburg culture. The district is pedestrian and bicycle friendly, as well as having electric vehicle chargers. When bike share platforms arrived in St. Petersburg, Grand Central was among the first to have them installed. Grand Central is easily accessible through the City's public transportation system.

One of the primary directives of the Main Street program is economic revitalization and repurposing of existing structures, and Grand Central has taken this concept to another level. The district was once dotted with gas stations and auto repair shops end to end. Those facilities have been reborn as taco stands, eclectic restaurants and coffee shops. Long time businesses have also seen great improvement, and are benefiting from the efforts by Grand Central.

As the city continues to reinvent itself, Grand Central will provide a home, an entrepreneurial enclave, and creative space for interesting people with imaginative ideas and dreams. A famous selection from the American songbook told the story of the place beyond the rainbow, Grand Central's efforts in the future will aspire to endeavor. Whether you want to come for an hour or for a day, the Grand Central District has something for you.

The Grand Central District is a vibrant and eclectic neighborhood that is unique in St Petersburg. Its creative ethos and grassroots organizational determination led to the creation of one of the largest gatherings in the Southeastern United States to celebrate the LGTBQ community and to issue a call to action for equality. In this complicated and divisive era, the GCDA board gathered early in 2017 to discuss the possibility of creating yet another event around National Coming Out Day in October. The same energy that put GCDA on the map went into overdrive and the result is the momentous citywide celebration that is Come Out St Pete 2017. My admiration for everyone that contributed to the hundreds of hours working and planning is boundless. It is with great privilege that I welcome each and every one attending and enjoying the weeks worth of events.

Peace and love,

Jonathan Tallon, GCDA Board President





Dear Friends,

On behalf of the citizens of the Sunshine City, welcome and thank you for taking part in this inaugural year for the **Come OUT St. Pete** series of events. We are honored to host this gathering of residents and visitors who identify as LGBTQ, as well as their families, friends, community supporters, and allies. We welcome all those joining us here in St. Petersburg for these important events, like the Come OUT St Pete CommUnity March and A Taste of Grand Central.

Our city is well known for being inclusive and accepting of all who live, work, and play here, and welcoming **Come OUT St. Pete** is a wonderful expression of our shared support for our LGBTQ community. My sincere thanks to the event organizers and supporters for their time and dedication to making this first **Come OUT St. Pete** a success.

As you enjoy the events and activities, we invite you to explore St. Pete and discover one of America's most LGBTQ-friendly destinations, having once again earned a perfect 100 in the HRC's Municipal Equality Index. Please be sure to sample the hospitality for which the Sunshine City is world famous.

Thank you again, and welcome!

Sincerely,

  
Mayor Rick Kriseman







# COME OUT ST. PETE



Bridging The Bay LGBTQ Community March  
Grand Central District St Petersburg FL  
Saturday October 14th 10am to 12pm

## March Route

[www.comeoutstpete.org](http://www.comeoutstpete.org)



Photo credit  
Watermark

Come OUT St. Pete and the Grand Central District would like to recognize the contributions of three OUT and proud St. Petersburg City Council members Darden Rice, Amy Elizabeth Foster, and Steve Kornell.

**“Visibility saves lives and makes safer communities. The progress of equality for the LGBTQ+ community is linked to providing a community where it is safe to live genuinely and safely.”**

- Darden Rice



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# COME OUT

ST. PETE

## Join us for a new LGBTQ+ Celebration in

**SATURDAY  
OCT. 7**

- OVER THE RAINBOW GRAND CENTRAL PROUD CHALLENGE
- GRAND CENTRAL MARKET @ PUNKY'S
- BIG GAY BUSCH GARDENS DAY

**SUNDAY  
OCT. 8**

- METRO'S BEDROX REUNION SUNSET BEACH PARTY
- MARY'S AFTER BEACH BASH @ HAMBURGER MARY'S ST. PETE

**WEDNESDAY  
OCT. 11**

- TASTE OF GRAND CENTRAL RESTAURANTS
- TIGLFF MOVIE "AFTER LOUIE" @ EPIC/EMPATH HEALTH
- COMING OUT STORIES @ METRO'S LGBT WELCOME CENTER
- SHUFFLE BOARD CHIC @ URBAN COMFORT

**THURSDAY  
OCT. 12**

- COME OUT RED CARPET PARTY @ ST. PETE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS
- TIGLFF IN PARTNERSHIP WITH ST. PETERSBURG PRESERVATION MOVIES IN THE PARK @ NORTH STRAUB PARK "SOME LIKE IT HOT"
- RED HOT AFTER PARTY @ ENIGMA

# EVENT SCHEDULE

OCTOBER 7 – 15, 2017

## St. Petersburg and surrounding cities

**FRIDAY**  
**OCT. 13**

- COME OUT, STAY OUT LGBT SENIOR RESOURCE FAIR @ SUNSHINE SENIOR CENTER
- GRAND CENTRAL ZOMBIE PUB CRAWL
- TIGLFF MOVIES @ SUNDIAL
- METRO'S COME OUT YOUTH NIGHT

**SATURDAY**  
**OCT. 14**

- COMMUNITY CONVERSATION WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS
- BRIDGING THE BAY LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY MARCH
- GRAND CENTRAL PROUD FESTIVAL
- SECOND SATURDAY COME OUT ARTWALK
- CROISEURS DELLA NOCHE, A GENDER-BENDING FASHION EXTRAVAGANZA

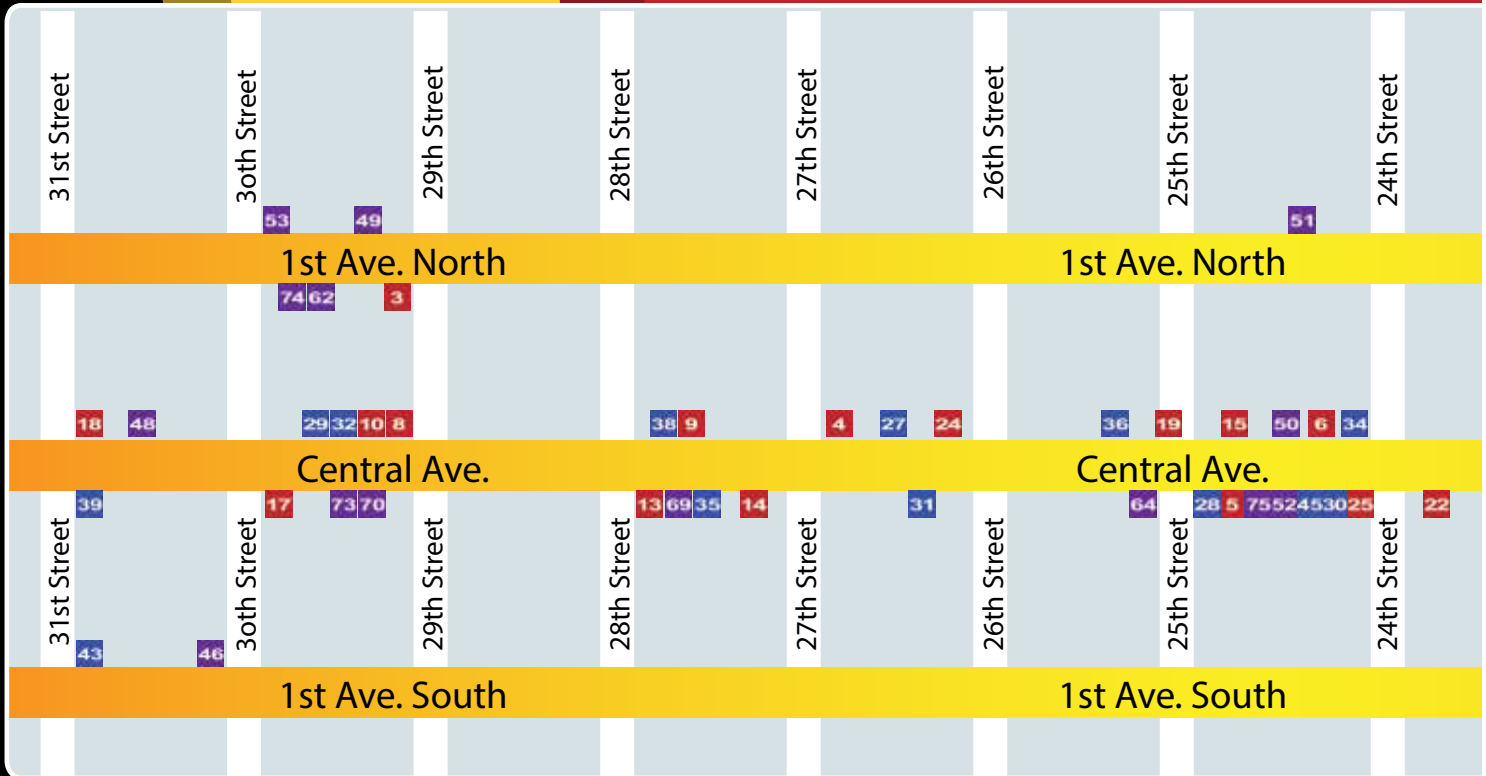
**SUNDAY**  
**OCT. 15**

- COME OUT WORSHIP @ KING OF PEACE MCC
- EQUALITY FLORIDA FAMILY VALUES PICNIC IN GULFPORT
- BITCHES WHO BRUNCH @ PUNKY'S
- COME OUT ST PETE CARIBBEAN RELIEF CONCERT @ PUNKY'S

For more details visit [comeoutstpete.org](http://comeoutstpete.org)

# EAT, SHOP, CONNECT!

The Grand Central District, a Florida Main Street located in Central Saint Petersburg, offers a unique collection of locally owned bars and restaurants,



## WHERE TO EAT/DRINK

- 1 **The Burg Bar & Grill** • 1752 Central Ave • 727.894.2874
- 2 **Cage Brewing Company** • 2001 1st Ave S • 727.459.4866
- 3 **Cappy's Pizza** • 2900 1st Ave N • 727.321.3020
- 4 **Casita Taqueria** • 2663 Central Ave • 727.498.8749
- 5 **Community Café** • 2444 Central Ave • 727.222.6979
- 6 **Creative Soul Studio** • 2425 Central Ave • 727.575.7977
- 7 **Dog Bar** • 2300 Central Ave • 727.317.4968
- 8 **Engine Rose** • 2901 Central Ave • 727.498.8951
- 9 **The Garage on Central** • 2729 Central Ave • 727.258.4850
- 10 **Hawthorne Bottle Shoppe** • 2927 Central Ave • 727.800.2810
- 11 **Leafy Greens Café** • 1626 Central Ave • 727.289.7087
- 12 **Love Food Central** • 2057 Central Ave • 727.317.2034
- 13 **Lucky Star Lounge** • 2760 Central Ave • 727.327.7359
- 14 **Nu-Mex** • 2710 Central Ave
- 15 **Old Key West Bar & Grill** • 2451 Central Ave • 727.623.0969
- 16 **Pinellas Ale Works** • 1962 1st Ave S • 727.235.0970
- 17 **Pom Pom's Teahouse & Sandwicheria** • 2950 Central Ave • 727.873.6992
- 18 **Punky's Bar & Grill** • 3063 Central Ave • 727.201.4712
- 19 **The Queens Head** • 2501 Central Ave • 727.452.3878
- 20 **Right Around the Corner** • 2244 Central Ave • 813.360.0766
- 21 **Roots of the Sun** • 17 21st Street N • 850.443.2523
- 22 **Taco Bus** • 2324 Central Ave • 727-322-5001
- 23 **Urban Brew & BBQ** • 1939 Central Ave • 727.822.8919
- 24 **Urban Comfort** • 2601 Central Ave • 727.623.9823
- 25 **Urban Deli and Drafts** • 2410 Central Ave • 727.201.8157
- 26 **Zaytoon Grill** • 1618 Central Ave • 727.623.0983

\*Brick Street Farms • 2001 2nd Ave S • 727.310.5775

\*PedalPub St Pete • 1975 3rd Ave S • 727.581.3388

## WHERE TO SHOP

### Antiques/Collectables/Home Goods

- 27 **The Bungaleaux** • 2635 Central Ave • 727.317.5667
- 28 **Castaways** • 2454 Central Ave • 727.459.4342
- 29 **D & A Ambient Antiques** • 2939 Central Ave • 727.272.5747
- 30 **The Foundry Furnishings** • 2428 Central Ave • 727.643.0698
- 31 **Motherlode Central** • 2614 Central Ave • 727.369.8575
- 32 **Studio/Antiques LLC** • 2937 Central Ave • 941.448.3579

### Arts/Crafts/Classes

- 33 **The Clay Center of St. Petersburg** • 2010 1st Ave S • 727.439.8522
- 34 **Grand Central Stained Glass & Graphics** • 2401 Central Ave • 727.328.2428
- 35 **Noisemakers** • 2730 Central Ave • 727.345.7472
- 36 **Painting with a Twist** • 2527 Central Ave • 727.327.4488
- 37 **Woodfield Fine Art** • 2253 Central Ave • 727.254.6981

### Automotive

- 38 **R&D Auto Service** • 2763 Central Ave • 727.321.4171
- 39 **Tint World St. Pete** • 3050 Central Ave • 727.341.9595

### Books

- 40 **Haslam's Book Store** • 2025 Central Ave • 727.822.8616
- 41 **Lighthouse Books, ABAA** • 1735 1st Ave N • 727.822.3278

### Miscellaneous

- 42 **Central Ave Vapors** • 1610 Central Ave • 727.851.9045
- 43 **Durable Coatings** • 3055 1st Ave S • 727.327.6500
- 44 **Peace of Mind Smoke Shop** • 1628 Central Ave • 727.623.4838
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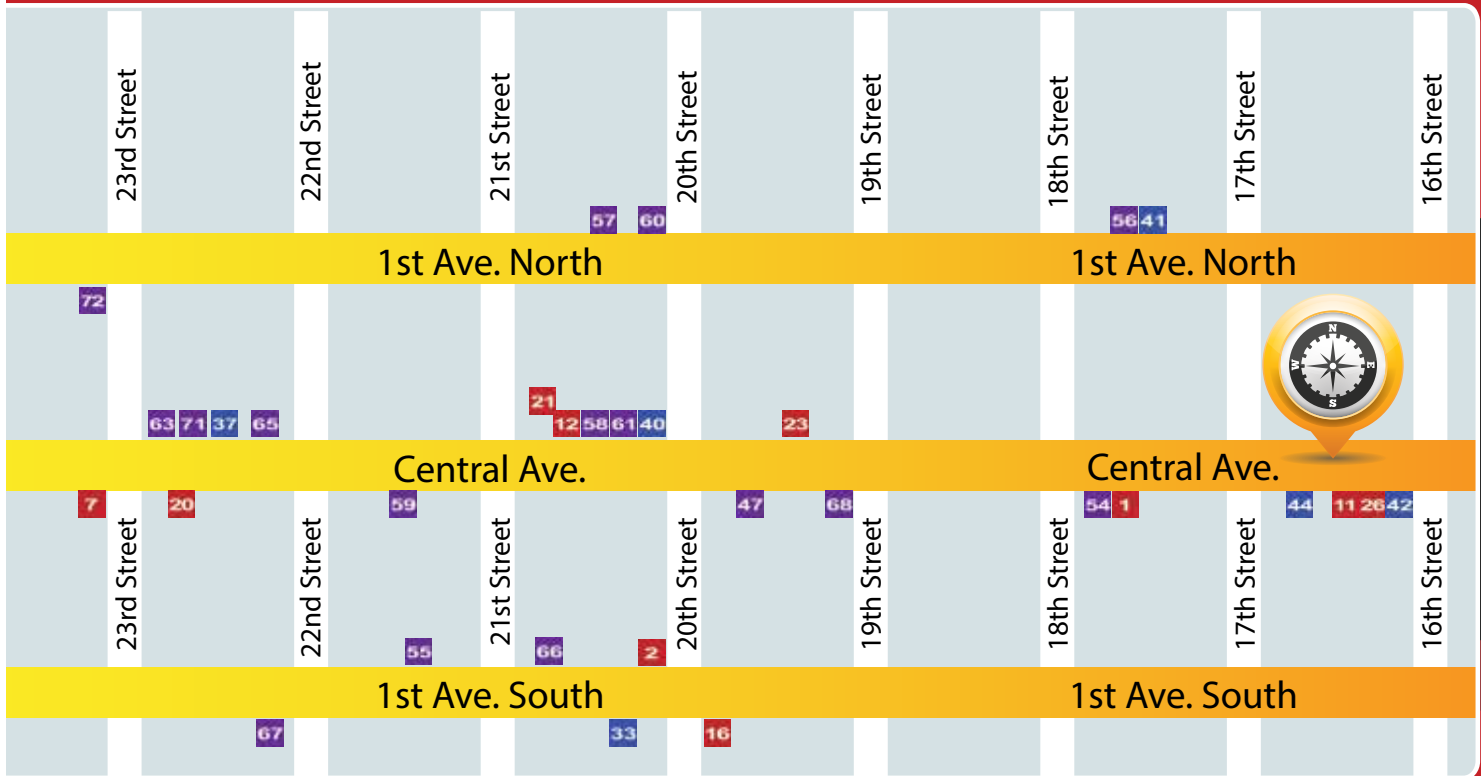
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- 47 Roundhouse Creative Studio • 1980 Central Ave • 727.954.8880
- 48 Webtivity Designs • 3021 Central Ave • 727.386.7216

### Attorney

- 49 Coleman Law • 2901 1st Ave N • 727.214.0400
- 50 Robin Doty, Attorney at Law PA • 2429 Central Ave #204 • 727.367.3450

### Bookkeeping/Accounting/Taxes

- 51 CPA By the Bay • 2435 1st Ave N • 727.896.1042
- 52 Joel Schmitz, CPA • 2436 Central Ave • 727.471.8580
- 53 Strategic Tax & Financial Services, LLC • 2961 1st Ave N, Suite G • 727.744.7938

### Entertainment

- 54 The Hideaway • 1756 Central Ave • 727.644.7895
- 55 St. Petersburg Opera Company • 2145 1st Ave S • 727.823.2040
- 56 The Zoo Studios - Us Artists Group, LLC • 1741 1st Ave N • 727.350.5962
- \*freeFall Theatre • 6099 Central Ave • 727.498.5205

### Health/Wellness/Salon

- 57 Beyond Beauty • 2023 1st Ave N • 727.289.6910
- 58 Central Cycling • 2055 Central Ave • 727.895.7746
- 59 Euphoria Salon & Spa • 2140 Central Ave • 727.384.6600
- 60 Handcrafted Healing • 2011 1st Ave N • 727.914.7318
- 61 Intuition Salon & Spa • 2053 Central Ave • 727.322.3802
- 62 Peak Performance Soft Tissue & Spine • 2950 1st Ave N • 727.459.0610
- 63 Salon Swank • 2253 Central Ave #103 • 727.800.5047
- 64 Traditions School of Herbal Medicine • 2522 Central Ave • 727.318.2505

### Non-Profit/Community Organization

- 65 LGBT Welcome Center • 2227 Central Ave • 727.201.4925
- \*Equality Florida • 813.870.3735
- \*Metro Wellness & Community Center • 3251 3rd Ave N #125 • 727.321.3854
- \*Tampa Bay Diversity Chamber of Commerce • 3251 3rd Ave N • 727.755.8390

### Miscellaneous

- 66 Classic Architectural, Inc • 2063 1st Ave S • 727.243.6737
- 67 Commercial Electrical Contracting • 2220 1st Ave S • 727.328.1700
- 68 Goodyear Rubber Products • 1912 Central Ave • 727.822.4672
- \*Anik Perspectives • 925.330.3859
- \*Cheers! Events • 2133 2nd Ave S • 727.894.5558
- \*GayStPete House • 4505 5th Ave N • 727.365.0544
- \*GayStPete.com • 4505 5th Ave N • 727.365.0544
- \*Guardian • 150 2nd Ave N #1600 • 727.347.1930
- \*Local Shopper LLC • 2908 Beach Blvd S, Gulfport
- \*Sapphire Audio Visual Experts • 4200 Beach Dr SE • 727.373.6950

### Pets

- 69 The Bow Wow Barber • 2756 Central Ave • 727.914.4681
- 70 Two Mutts and A Poodle • 2920 Central Ave • 727.323.5842
- \*SPCA Veterinary Center • 3250 5th Ave N • 727.220.1770

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# GRAND CENTRAL DISTRICT

# COMING OUT STORY



## SHAWN

I was 24 years old, and still in the Navy during the time of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” For many years, I was terrified of coming out, partly because of fear that I could get discharged from the Navy, but mostly of being ostracized and shamed by the people closest to me.

When 9/11 happened, it was my last year of the Navy, and I just remember staring at the television that night thinking that any ordinary day, it could be me. I could just walk into work one day, and never come home. That was the day that I decided I couldn’t live the rest of my life as a lie; I couldn’t deny myself any chance at true happiness just because I was afraid of what people would think.

I called my aunt and told her to sit down because I had something important to tell her. When I told her, she said “Oh! I thought you were going to tell me you were dying!” We both laughed and my mission to come out became instantly easier.

When I told my dad, he said, “Well that doesn’t change anything between you and me.” And I couldn’t help but cry.

When I told my mom, she said, “When did you decide that?” And I had to explain to her that that’s not exactly how it works. But she accepted it, nonetheless.

I lost a few friends for sure, and some who I “knew” would never accept it, I chose to lose contact with, because I figured it would just be easier for both of us. But I sometimes regret not giving them a chance to decide for themselves.

Overall, I consider myself very lucky to have had such a loving and supporting family and group of friends. But not everyone’s coming out story has a happy ending, and that’s why we all must stand united as a community, and why I am so glad to be a part of this.

**THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO *BARKED* FOR US 2 YEARS IN A ROW!**

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# COMING OUT STORY



## TERRY

I was born in the early 60s in rural Michigan. My first realization of being gay was one day on the kindergarten school bus when a classmate whipped out his “wee-wee” (that’s what you call it when you are six years old). I liked what I saw! Taking showers in school was a torture trying not to get aroused. I would stare at the wall or the floor (okay, I peeked a little). Even though I was not out in high school, some people suspected. I wasn’t bullied much partly because my community was pretty open and accepting, but mainly because my best friends were football players.

Like high school, I didn’t come out in college either. I didn’t know anyone like me. I didn’t know how to find anyone like me. There were no gay bars or hangouts in my little college town. We didn’t have the Internet or hookup apps. I was also in denial. I was afraid of losing friends and being disowned by my family. When I moved to Sarasota in 1987, I finally realized I was not alone when I called one of those telephone chat lines. I still did not come out as gay but considered myself bisexual.

In 1992, I moved to Miami to start a new job. After my first visit to South Beach, I finally became true to myself. I am gay and I like it. About a year later when I was living with my boyfriend on South Beach, I finally came out to my co-workers, my sister and finally, my brothers. I did not come out to my parents even though they came for a visit. Instead I de-gayed my apartment and life for their visit. I was still afraid they would not accept me.

In 1997, my company transferred me to Delaware. All this time I was passing my boyfriend off as a roommate. Well when my mom called me right after moving to Delaware and my “South Beach roommate” answered the phone, the gay was out of the bag. I admitted to her I was gay. She cried on the phone. She didn’t know why she was crying as she said she had known since I was little. Thanks mom! You could have let me in on it. She didn’t care that I was gay. She loved me. She was not embarrassed that she had a gay son. Actually, she told everyone and outed me to my entire hometown. When I took my boyfriend there for the first time, I was so nervous. I wasn’t sure what to expect from my relatives, childhood friends, and neighbors. The open and accepting community I knew growing up opened their arms and welcomed us. They didn’t care I was gay. They didn’t care I had a boyfriend. To them I was still Terry and nothing had changed by being gay.

In hindsight, I wish I would have come out much sooner. It was more stressful trying to conceal the fact I was gay. Everyone must assess his or her own situation, but my advice is be true to yourself. The people in your life that truly love you will continue to love you. If it doesn’t go as planned, you have your LGBTQ+ community to support you — something I did not have when I was growing up in the closet.





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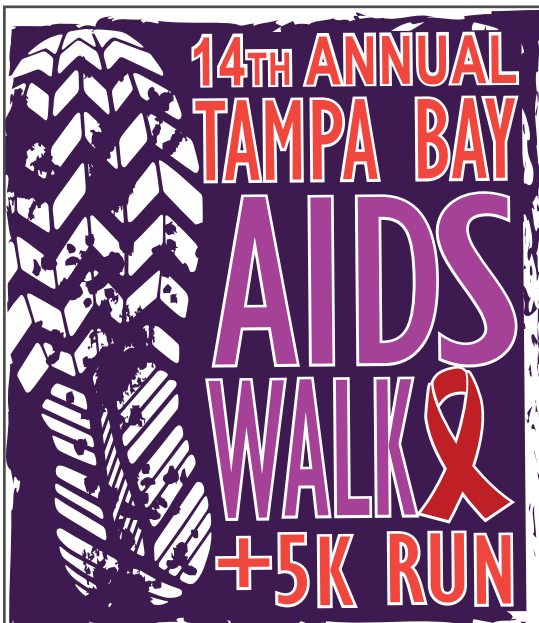
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**Walk: FREE** (donations accepted)

**Vendor Fair and Registration: 8 am | Rapid HIV Testing Begins: 8:30 am**  
**Opening Ceremonies: 9 am**  
**Timed 5k: 9:15 am | Walk: 9:30 am**  
**Post event to follow**

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**Are you ready for positive changes in your community?**

Uniting our LGBTQ+ community with our straight allies through positive activities and events. Promoting volunteerism and activism for a fulfilling LGBTQ+ lifestyle.

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 Continue to add fuel to Project No Labels on a monthly basis by becoming a member and enjoy exclusive benefits from our community partners!  
 Sign up now! [ProjectNoLabels.org/membership](http://ProjectNoLabels.org/membership)

Get Your Membership Card for **ONLY \$4.99/Month!**

Project No Labels provides a safe and positive environment for like minded individuals to meet and engage with the community. We host an event or an activity at least once a week.

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 Sponsorship Opportunities Available  
 Project No Labels is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization | 51-0464720

## TASTE OF GRAND CENTRAL RESTAURANTS

### PARTICIPATING RESTAURANTS

|  |  |                        |
|--|--|------------------------|
|  | <b>Community Cafe</b>                      | <b>5 PM - 9 PM</b>     |
|  | <b>Old Key West Bar &amp; Grill</b>        | <b>11 AM - 6 PM</b>    |
|  | <b>Punky's Bar and Grill</b>               | <b>5 PM - 10 PM</b>    |
|  | <b>Pom Pom's Teahouse and Sandwicheria</b> | <b>11 AM - 9 PM</b>    |
|  | <b>The Queens Head</b>                     | <b>5 PM - 10 PM</b>    |
|  | <b>Craftsman House Gallery</b>             | <b>10 AM - 5:30 PM</b> |
|  | <b>Casita Taqueria</b>                     | <b>11 AM - 9 PM</b>    |

Participating restaurants are donating a percentage of their sales to Come OUT St Pete/Grand Central District. Please Eat OUT and enjoy.



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# COMING OUT STORY

## JEREMY



From the age of about six or seven until around 15, I was relentlessly bullied, ridiculed and assaulted because I acted “gay,” a true sissy that hated violence and loved to dance. It seemed that no matter where I lived or what school I went to, the jeers and fights would ensue. I was put in detention or suspension from school for fights I never caused. I spent most of my childhood defending myself and living in fear. I was caught playing with my sister’s Barbies, wearing my mother’s clothes and even once with make up on, which just perpetuated more abuse. When I became an adult and my mannerisms changed (ironically), I found myself pushing the closet door open and coming to terms with who I am.

As I entered the gay community fresh and new, I was greeted with welcoming arms ... and beds. I was new meat and wasn’t mad about it. I was now in a new school of life looking for a place to feel comfortable. I started finding friends that I seemed to have been looking for my whole life. The baggage of my childhood was shared with countless other gay men and women who had similar experiences. I was accepted for who I was.

My personality was much different than that of my childhood. I was now a man. I spent my teenage years practicing to be a man and leaving the “girly boy” behind. I was no longer the meek, sensitive little boy that cried too quickly; I had become a big, strong man with the ability to fit in. I had transformed. I knew if I could accomplish this, I would be accepted and not teased anymore. But it was all on the outside.

After coming out and settling in with my gay community, I was often asked if I were truly gay. The traits of what would be considered “gay” were not apparent anymore and I had to assure them that I was, in fact, gay. It seemed the struggle was now to undo what I had done to myself and my personality. I had experiences with women in my late teens, and because of that, I questioned my sexuality too. However, I knew the true answer: Being straight was a phase.

At my first Gay Pride, I was in awe. It was the first time I had experienced being out in the open — and even flamboyant — without hiding in the shadows. I was in the safety of numbers and enjoyed the diversity within our community. I realized there was not one “type” of gay, but a rainbow of personalities. I never felt so alive.

This newfound pride and courage propelled me to become a gay activist and demand equality and protection in society. We strived to open doors, build bridges and tackle hate head-on. It came with peace and it came with violence. Some were lost along the way and their honor only fueled our fire. We were fighting for our lives. I found my place. I built upon that and found love in myself in the process. Lovers and friends came and went, each teaching me something that I still cherish today. There were fond memories of parties, laughter and silliness with many moments of tears. Music, celebrations, fights and forgiveness — I wouldn’t exchange mine for another life.

Today, “coming out” isn’t just about being who I am — it is about the journey that I’ve made; it is about celebrating our community’s victories. Pride is about sharing that feeling with the queens, butches, bull dykes, lipsticks, drag queens, bears, leather boys, polos and punks, seniors and twinks. These are all my people and I am all of them. Not just one, but many. They are people I’m proud to know because our goal is the same: to be happy, to be ourselves, to be free.







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# COMING OUT STORY



## KAREN

I have been an ally of the gay community since before the initials climbed to “LGBTQIA+” — long before I planted my Media Garage Group sign in the St. Pete “Gayborhood.” I’m incredibly proud of my personal moral code, despite my upbringing. In the 90s, I spent countless hours in gay clubs dancing and making some of the best memories of my lifetime.

I planned on introducing my brother to my best friend, Anson, in Raleigh, North Carolina. Disappointingly, my brother is a total homophobe and was freaked out about meeting him. I responded, “Don’t flatter yourself.” It was absolutely insane to me that he thought that because Anson is a gay man, he is attracted to every other man that walks the earth. I thought, heterosexual men are not attracted to every woman they see, so why would every homosexual man be attracted to you? Stop yourself. You are

ridiculous. Love is love. To see a straight couple walking down the street holding hands makes you feel warm and gushy inside, but seeing the same from a gay couple repulses you? Total nonsense.

Fast forward to 2013, when my everything, my only child came out as gay. I remember it like it were yesterday. She came out of the hot tub (it’s not a closet in all cases) and said, “Momma, my entire family is going to hate me.” As a parent, you are your child’s superhero, so I said, “Before you finish your next statement, know that I am one of the strongest women you will ever meet in your lifetime. I will fight for you, honor you, and do everything in my power to make sure you are okay.” She hesitated and said, “I am gay.” It knocked the wind out of me. I had to keep my chin from hitting my chest. Not because I loved her any less — on the contrary, I felt closer to her. A deep-rooted fear took hold of my being, but I managed. I kept stoic and I was strong. My non-verbals held steady and I replied, “I love you with every fiber of my being; don’t worry about your family not loving you. I will fight the fight with you. I will always love you and my love, our love, is enough.”

I was scared. I was scared of all the hate I was raised with. I was scared to my core. And I think I was baffled by what I heard. My fear asked her, since she didn’t have a girlfriend, to just “sit with it.” In retrospect, I am not ashamed of my words or of this decision. Personally, I like to sit with things. Figure out the next strategic move. Plan the next ten steps. I suppose I’m just a research-based thinker. Or maybe I just personally needed time to sit with it. I don’t really know.

Three months later, I fetched her from school and she hopped in the car happier and more energetic than I had seen her in months — maybe even a year. “Momma, I came out gay to all my friends today.” I took a deep, silent breath. What if someone had said something mean to my one and only; the person who I protect and would sacrifice my own life for? “Everyone still wants to be my friend.”

So I encourage all parents to embrace your children; whether they’re straight, gay, questioning, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, transgender or any other identity. They are your babies. They are your DNA. It is your job to provide them with comfort and love regardless of the upbringing that ingrained fear and intolerance in you. It’s a new day, my friends, and I am grateful for it.

This generation has been raised in a better, more inclusive time. They have evolved during an era of acceptance that can’t be stopped. If you’re a parent of an LGBTQIA+ child, try not to worry or fear. We live in a new normal, for which I am so happy — happy for my only, my everything, my gay daughter.



# COMING OUT STORY



## C. REICHERT

I thought I would marry a prince, always waiting for my white knight to show up and whisk me away. But when my boyfriends kissed me, it didn't feel like that moment in the movies; the ones with the fireworks and romantic music when the guy finally kisses the girl at the end. Instead, it felt off, like when you lie to a friend about their terrible haircut.

My friend Jon called me his "fag hag" one day sitting on his bed in his room. "Yeah, that's right," I said, claiming that label as soon as it passed from his lips. Jon, my best friend since Journalism class, was 17, but had been out all his life. I told Jon that we should go to the teen LGBT support group meetings to help him to find a boyfriend. After all, I had a car and he didn't. I told myself I was doing him a favor and I liked gay people anyway.

After one of the meetings, we all decided to go to the gay coffee shop and in walked a familiar face. She had short blonde hair, masculine-style clothes and I had no idea how I knew her. Finally, she just called my name and I turn to get a good look at her. Finally she said, "French class!" I smiled and a flood of images ran through my mind.

We talked for hours. She walked me to my car and was staring at the ground when she asked me out on a date. The instant I agreed, I wanted to cancel.

We decided to meet at our old elementary school. We walked around the campus, sitting on the swings and talking about all the times we should've met. She grabbed my hand. Sheer panic set into my body like someone dropped an ice cube down my spine. This felt kind of normal and it was terrifying. Her hands were soft and she interlaced her fingers with mine like they were designed to be together. We went to dinner, where she explained that she had never been on a date before, never kissed anyone either, and she was nervous. I thought it was kind of cute to be her first date ever. I admitted that I was maybe "a little bisexual" and she teased me for being so shy.

After dinner, she took me back to my car. As I got out, my heart was beating out of my chest. The kiss that would determine if I were truly gay or not was about to happen. I leaned against my car and told her I had a good time. She smiled and started to lean toward me. It was like time stopped and she was coming closer and closer and then ... she hit my nose with her nose in a kind of head bump. Then the top of her lip hit my lip and I was off balance and had to take a step back to prevent falling. A few more nose bumps later, she leaned back with a silly grin on her face. I smiled at her and told her I'd see her later and drove off.

In the car, I kept thinking about that kiss. It was the worst, the absolute worst and best kiss of my life up until then. I said out loud to myself, "Well, I'm a lesbian." The words felt real on my tongue and in my ears. My whole body burned with relief and fear.

One night, my mom had called to grill me on what I was up to. She kept asking leading questions, "So are you dating anyone new?", "Who are you hanging out with these days?". I wanted to just get it over with and stop stressing about everyone's reaction. So, I took a deep breath and let out the three hardest, heaviest words I had to say, "I am gay." I tossed out the words like I was rolling the dice for a board game and I was just hoping to pass "Go." My mom responded, "But you like to wear dresses." I said, "I can still wear them." She said, "But you want to have kids." I said, "I still do." "Well then, I'm going to be the coolest mom about this!" It had always been her style to be supportive; this didn't change that. However, it took her a while to truly catch up to me. She had her own journey to acceptance that had entirely nothing to do with me.

Eighteen years later and I am married, I am a mother and yes, I still wear dresses.







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# COMING OUT STORY



## COURT BISHOP Hippocratic Oath

I grew up in a small southern town. A small, white, Republican, “Good Ol’ Boy”-type town. I’m not here to bash these (more-than-likely-“MAGA”-hat-wearing) types of towns, but when the “N” word is tossed around as easily as recalling one’s breakfast in certain circles, a spade is a spade. And breakfast is probably Budweiser.

My parents weren’t really like this. Then again, my parents weren’t really around. I loved them. I wanted to make them proud. But when it came to following a moral compass, I did the majority of that navigation on my own. They each had things though. Although an atheist, my dad was intensely conservative. And for as free-spirited as my mom was, she passed her share of judgment.

Fast-forward through nearly 20 years of self-hatred, shame and paralyzing fear; I’m a college student at the University of South Florida. I started dating my first girlfriend in high school: I was a junior and she was a sophomore. We were each hiding in separate taped-up shoe boxes behind old Halloween decorations and second grade soccer trophies on the very top shelf of the least trafficked closet we could find ... metaphorically. Only a few of our closest friends knew the truth — and we waited an entire year to tell them (as if they didn’t already know). We decided to move from our small town together to attend college in Tampa.

Freedom. No more attempting to wear “girly” clothes to make my father think I’m pretty and straight. No more acting like my girlfriend was my “best friend” during visits with my mother. Well, maybe not no more, but a lot less. It was a freedom I needed. A freedom I held in my mind’s eye while being taken to the emergency room twice for severe panic attacks in 12th grade. I was under so much physical, emotional and spiritual stress from fear of being “caught,” that it completely consumed me. But now, sweet freedom.

I wasn’t necessarily “out and proud” at school, but I wasn’t not out. I lived with my girlfriend and a roommate and we three were inseparable. We stuck with this arrangement for nearly two years, but I soon outgrew my high school relationship. I wanted to explore. I wanted to meet new people. I wanted to let my rainbow flag fly. When she and I broke up, she chose to move back to our hometown — I stayed. The thought of crawling back into that shoe box made me ill.

I met new women. I dated new women. All kinds of them. Some with shaved heads; some aggressively feminine; some who were still toying with the idea of lesbianism (\*ABORT! ABORT!\*); some significantly older who showed me the ropes. And this was in the mid-2000s: pre-the “Yes We Can!” mentality that encouraged others to consider gays real live people! Facebook was barely a thing; apps didn’t exist. I had to actually make an effort to meet and get to know someone. Jesus, I’m only 33. This sounds like a “walk three miles uphill in the snow” kind of story. It’s true, nonetheless.

My parents got divorced when I was six and I lived with my dad for the majority of my childhood. During college, I spoke with my father maybe two or three times a month. Our conversations consisted of riveting material relating to: school; his work; my work; my grandmother; my car. End of list. We always ended with I love yous, but our communication rarely dipped below surface level. He never asked about my feelings. He never asked about my social or romantic life. I wanted a deeper connection with him, but I was also nervous that if I shared anything of substance, he would discover my secret. Every time he called, my insides would regress to high-school-panic mode, and it only got worse over time.

I stopped answering the phone. I couldn’t handle the anxiety anymore. In hindsight, I was only relocating the stress, as I felt an immense amount of guilt for not picking up. This continued for about two months; the frequency of the calls growing to near-daily.

<< CONTINUED >>





One late afternoon, I was driving home from work in my silver Mazda 626. An “I Love Lesbians” air freshener was swinging from my rearview mirror as I neared my house. I turned to park and saw my father sitting in a chair on my porch. I reactively snapped the elastic on the air freshener and threw the whole thing to the floor.

My dad was not a confrontational man. He was soft-spoken and rational. He was slow to anger and quick to stuffing down emotion. He stood from the chair and came toward me. “WHERE THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN?” My dad yelled at me. My dad never yelled at me. “I ... I ... I didn’t want to talk to you,” I mumbled while staring directly at the ground. “WELL, WHY THE HELL NOT?!” I quietly walked over to the second chair and sat down.

I started crying. “Um ... well ...” I couldn’t even form words. We sat there motionless. Tears ran down my cheeks and my whole body knew it was now or never. Hot truth lava boiled up inside of me until I spewed, “Dad, I’m gay.”

He joined me on my ground-watching mission and we continued to sit in silence for what felt like half of forever. “Okay ... ?” He finally questioned nervously. “So ... w ... h ...” He let out a series of consonant sounds, but never managed any words. He wouldn’t even look at me. I knew, right at that moment, our relationship changed forever.

Our communication was sparse over the next few years. Every once in a while, it felt like he was growing — we were growing — and he was inching toward understanding; then there would be talks strictly dedicated to “what he was supposed to tell his friends.” I would occasionally return home for a visit, but it was always the same rote script: school, work, grades, car. Sometimes we’d discuss nature-related topics like gardening, fishing and space travel, but we never spoke of matters of the heart.

Time went on and I turned into a 30-year-old. I’m not sure how it happened. I was Beyoncé-crazy in love with my then-fiancée (now wife) Jen, in our third year together. At that point, my dad and I were on okay terms. We were concerned with one another’s well-being. We loved each other from afar. Sometimes, during holidays, we’d drink beers together and honestly talk about things like life and love and death and the meaning of all of it. Those were the times when I saw the guy that his friends told me about.

In June of 2014, we discovered that my dad had glioblastoma. Brain cancer. It was a large, malignant, highly aggressive tumor that there was no turning back from. My father never remarried and I’m an only child, so I was the main receptacle for the news.

My dad was scheduled to have surgery to remove as much of the mass as possible. I was hanging out with him in his hospital room the day prior. We legitimately spent time together — played trivia, he read the National Geographic I bought for him in the gift shop, I taught him about the Internet and created a Facebook page for him. We hung out like we used to when I was little.

We talked: about his father and sister, both of whom died by the time I was three; about my mother and what their relationship was like for the first ten years; even about Jen and I. My dad liked Jen. He never really dove too deeply into any rigorous questioning about her, but I know he liked when I spoke of her. He liked her intelligence and her treatment of me. He liked her career as a Nurse Practitioner and how she asked the doctors the right questions and handled everything at the hospital. He never outright said any of this, but I know that’s how he felt.

After her shift, Jen drove two hours to join us for a while. She had to head back home that evening for the following day’s work, but she wanted to come check on things. She wanted to come hug him and hug me and make sure that we both understood what was happening.

A doctor who I didn’t recognize entered the room. He held his clipboard and smiled, “Hello, Mr. Bishop.” My dad kindly returned the greeting. It was clear that the doctor was going to be sharing some very private health information, so he wanted to ensure that he wasn’t going to be breaking any ethical medical codes. “And who is this?” The doctor looked at me. “That’s my daughter,” my dad replied. “And this?” The doctor looked in Jen’s direction. “That’s my daughter-in-law.”



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# COMING OUT STORY



## JIMMY

### Life is so much brighter outside of the closet

So ... no matter how much you've tried to deny it, you've come to the realization that you are gay. You've really known it for as long as you could remember, but hoped that it would magically go away or fix itself. This is how I felt when I was still in the closet. The thing is, you and I are not broken. You are merely at a crossroads in life that millions of people have, are, and will struggle with. I did.

I remember when I was in my grade school years lying in bed at night not able to sleep, clenching the sheets over my head asking myself, "Why me? Why did this have to happen to me?!" I thought that if my terrible secret got out, it would hurt all of the important people in my life. So I played a part. I played a part of someone I was supposed to be. Someone that was not me. There is nothing more damaging to your soul than "living" life pretending to be someone else. It puts you in a dark place that seems to get bigger, darker, and more empty every lonely day. You may think you're all alone, and in all of your despair you don't realize that there are so many (just like

[but not exactly like] you) that are sharing your pain. It's that damned closet. Well ... step outside. It gets better. Life is so much brighter outside of the closet.

My sisters were the ones that helped me over my threshold. I was close to them and they knew, but I didn't know they knew. I thought I had everyone fooled, because the man I lived with was my "roommate." They had me over for dinner one night and after dessert just flat out asked me. I was so shocked and blindsided that I couldn't do anything but confess the truth. And as I heard myself for the first time admitting to someone, "I am gay," I overwhelmingly felt scared, yet liberated. I knew that from that point on, life was going to change in a major way. I knew that I had to tell my parents, and when the time was right, I did. My mom cried and tried to deny it for a week, but eventually (probably from some coaching from my sisters) came to a realization. She told me, "You are my son, and I will always love you no matter what. I just want you to be happy." With my dad, I thought it would go one of two ways. Either he'd blow his top and exile me from his life or he'd be like, "Okay." In hindsight, I was silly to think he'd react any differently than the latter, because he told me, "You are my son, and I will always love you no matter what. I just want you to be happy." I truly am one of the lucky ones to have had such a supportive and unconditionally loving family to help me through one of the most difficult times in my life.

That's how simple everyone's coming out story should be. Unfortunately, it's not. There's a full gamut of conditions that will determine the outcome of your coming out. What is consistent in everyone's coming out story is that you must rise above the fear and doubt. When the time is right, you will know. And you simply won't know what the reactions of the people in your life will be until you tell them. Luckily, there are plenty of resources that will help you out of the dark, over the threshold, and into the light — especially now. I suggest checking out the "It Gets Better Project" online. Watch some of the videos. They will inspire you, make you smile, and probably make you cry.

In my experiences, I've lost some people and found new people. The important ones — the ones that really mattered — stuck around. I've discovered a whole new gay world that I never knew existed. There have been ups and downs, just like anyone's roller coaster through life. Some people will love you and some people will hate you. Some really won't give a damn. There will be romance and heartache; new life and lives ended. Life will be life — gay, straight, whatever. But at least you can go through yours and own it as the person you truly are. Don't wake up one day in your fifties and realize that you've lived someone else's life, because you can't get those years back. Come out while you still have your life ahead of you.

People choose how honest to be with the world, and that is their right. I don't shove it down anyone's throats or introduce myself to people like, "Hi. I'm Jimmy. I'm gay." But I sure as hell don't hide it either. I am so proud to be a gay man. And I wouldn't have come to this point if I hadn't unfurled from the fetal position, stood up, and walked out of that closet. You won't know how people will react to your coming out until you make that jump over your closet's threshold, but know that there is a wide support net out here waiting to catch you. It's our gay community. That's why we call ourselves "family."





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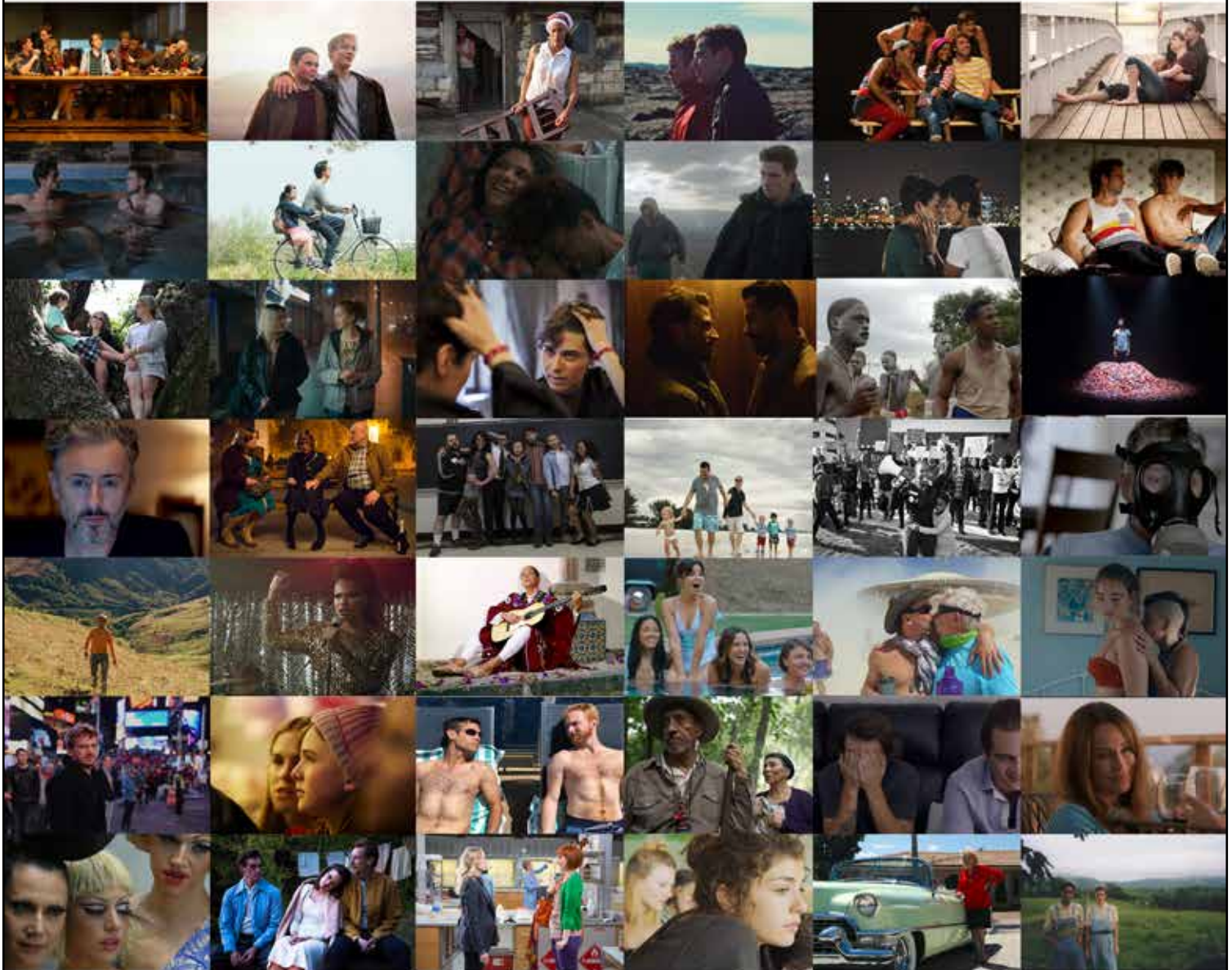
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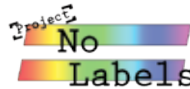
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