



## moments in gay new orleans history

by Frank Perez  
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### “LGBT Community Center of New Orleans”

The Lesbian and Gay Community Center of New Orleans turns twenty-two years old this year and a look back at its history is a fascinating study in the age old dichotomy of the ideal versus the reality. From its inception, the Community Center has embraced the noble vision of unifying the various sub-groups of New Orleans' LGBT+ community; conversely, the reality is that the Center's history has been marked by sharp division stemming from a lack of leadership, general dysfunction, and unrealized potential. Historically, the Center's Board of Directors has been prone to *coup d'états* from within. And yet, the Center is still here, which is something of a miracle considering all the challenges it has faced.

In 1992 the Lesbian and Gay Community Center of New Orleans was founded by a group of friends who believed the local LGBT community needed a central organization/location to dispense information and provide resources. Founding members included Stewart Butler, Betty Caldwell, Alfred Doolittle, Mark Harper, Nikki Kearby, Rip and Marsha Naquin-Delain, Toni Pizanie, Dianne Ranna, Alan Robinson, J. Michael Tetty, Leo Watermeier, and others.

Originally, the Center was located at 816 North Rampart Street in the first floor of a property owned by former State Representative and mayoral candidate Leo Watermeier. By the mid-1990s, the Center's Board began considering the possibility of a permanent home. In 1996, Co-Chairs Rip Naquin and Rene Parks led a fundraising campaign helping the Community Center raise \$30,000 for a building fund. These funds were placed in two CDs.

In 1999, Nikki Kearby and Betty Caldwell, who had co-founded the New Orleans chapter of PFLAG in 1982, graciously offered the Community Center the use of a building they owned on Decatur Street in the heart of the Marigny. Kearby and Caldwell renovated the space and charged the Center a very modest rent with the understanding that as the Center grew, the rent would gradually increase in order to offset the cost of the renovations. Kearby and Caldwell even expressed their intention to bequeath the building to the Community Center on the condition that it demonstrate it was stable and sustainable. None of this was in writing; Kearby and Caldwell made the arrangement in good faith. Various Boards throughout the 2000s squandered that good faith as well as the good faith of members of the community. The money raised for the building fund began to be diverted and used for operational expenses.

In 2009, the Center was on the verge of closing due to lack of adequate funding, a sad note which **Ambush** columnist Toni Pizanie (and Center founder and former Board member) recognized in her column, “Sappho's

Psalm.” Citing the Board's arrogance, Pizanie wrote, “The blame falls directly on the Center Board, and the non-business like or non-organized attitude that has caused the Center to fail . . . they have been unwilling to take advice or direction from anyone.” This criticism hit a nerve and as a result, the entire Board (Mary Griggs, Dave Haynik, Shawn Johnson, and Charlotte Klasson), with the exception of Crystal Little, resigned in protest. Little, a long-time volunteer, pleaded with them to not resign and argued that Pizanie's criticism was constructive, but they didn't want to hear it, thus proving Pizanie's point.



**Ambush columnist, the late Toni Pizanie**

When the building housing the Center suffered extensive water damage during Hurricane Isaac in 2012, Kearby and Caldwell's adopted daughter (who had assumed management of the property) told the Community Center Board that it would have to pay increased rent to cover the repairs, the Board (which never paid the increased rent they agreed to in 1999 to cover the initial renovations to the building) decided it could no longer stay there. The Center has been homeless since then.

All this is not to say the Center has not done some good. In 2000 the Center received a federal grant and launched the Hate Crimes Project, which

tracked hate-based crimes against LGBT and other groups targeted by discrimination. In 2003 the Center began hosting an annual Trans Day of Remembrance to commemorate the lives of transgender people murdered every year. After Hurricane Katrina, the Center hosted a meeting of the Community Coalition, a collective of LGBT and allied organizations that met to share information and collaborate during the initial recovery period. And in 2011 the Center established a program called Safe Space for LGBT and questioning youth.

The Community Center is currently in a transitional phase. Last year the Center moved into a small administrative space in the Art Egg Studios on S. Broad Street and established a new Mission Statement. The current mission of the Community Center is to provide resources and advocacy that foster community development and social and economic justice efforts to strengthen the collective power of gender and sexual minorities and their allies in GNO area. The vision of the Center is to create a greater New Orleans area where gender and sexual minorities are equitable and empowered.

Concerning the future of the Center, current Director Sebastian Rey says, “We want to provide the things we can—information, referrals, advocacy, and communication. In fact, our online community resource directory

will provide accessible information about LGBT and allied doctors, lawyers, and other services in our area. Moving forward, we will focus especially on issues of economic and racial injustice, which we know disproportionately affect the LGBT community. In New Orleans, the income gap is severe, and LGBT people feel the effects through un- or underemployment—and we know that economic instability is a risk factor for HIV and suicide, which already ravage our community. Most importantly, we want to balance the trend of creating top-down programming with community-driven projects. We will support individuals in our community to pursue their own visions for LGBT equality, offering the tools for one person to create the veterans' support program and another an LGBT youth book club. Nothing will move this community forward faster than enabling the individuals within it to realize their own power and their own ability to organize and make change.”

Although the Center's future is uncertain, one thing can be said about its history: it's a prolonged study in untapped potential. In that regard, The Center is truer reflection of our local LGBT+ community than the Center's critics would like to admit. Then again, Rey wryly observes, “Asking for LGBT unity is like asking for world peace.” Nevertheless, it's still a good question, certainly one worth asking.



## under the gaydar

by Tony Leggio  
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### Book of the Month

Stephanie Plum has returned with another fast-paced comedic adventure to keep readers riveted in Janet Evanovich's latest installment *Notorious Nineteen*. All your favorite characters are back along with a new cast of bad guys. This new novel has lingerie saleswoman turned bounty hunter Plum tracing a skip wanted for embezzling millions from an assisted living facility.

But tracking down the con man may prove harder than she thought. She teams up with her on-again, off-again boyfriend Joe Morelli to crack the case, while helping her mentor (and sometimes lover) Ranger fend off a deadly special forces adversary. She even enlists the help of her grandmother to go undercover at the old age complex with hilarious results.

Evanovich once again keeps the suspense and the witty mishaps high. One of the reasons I love this series is its ability to bring the characters to life. With each of her novels, it is like I am visiting with old friends. Very rarely do I find laugh out loud books and this

series succeeds extremely well.

Plum, although a flawed character, is the ultimate underdog that you root for. Each book is somewhat formulaic, but I never become disinterested, because the characters are so much fun. This speaks volumes for Evanovich's ability to keep your attentiveness after nineteen books.

For more information or this novel or any other Janet Evanovich books, go to [www.evanovich.com](http://www.evanovich.com).

### Tulane Avenue Just Got A Little Gay

Mid-City residents can rejoice, there is now a gay bar located in your neighborhood. The Tulane Avenue Bar has been open a short while and already has garnered rave reviews from locals and visitors alike. Now is your opportunity to check them out for yourself by going to their Grand Opening Celebration on Sunday, March 30th

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