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In a Progressive State, a City Where Gay Life Hangs by a Thread



Richard Perry/The New York Times

Project Wow, a no-frills drop-in center, provides some scarce refuge for Newark's gay, lesbian and transgender people.

By ANDREW JACOBS Published: December 2, 2007

NEWARK, Nov. 30 — To live in Newark often means grappling with unrelenting poverty, the anesthetizing lure of drugs, murderous gangs, a lack of decent jobs.

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Richard Perry/The New York Times Project Wow draws a few dozen young people each night, mostly for the camaraderie and shelter.

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But for gay men, lesbians and transgender people, there are additional obstacles that are seldom acknowledged: gay bashings, H.I.V., open hostility from many religious leaders and sometimes callous treatment by the police.

When venturing outside his Central Ward neighborhood, Tyrone Simpson, 19, stays on main thoroughfares and steers clear of the men in gang colors looking for easy quarry.

"If you're not prepared to fight, you're not going to survive in Newark," said Mr. Simpson, who is unabashedly gay.

New Jersey has become a national beacon for gay equality. It boasts some of the toughest anti-discrimination laws in the country, and recent legislation makes it one of only three states that recognize same-sex civil unions.

But here in the state's largest city, gay men and lesbians might as well live on another planet.

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Richard Perry/The New York Times
Edwin Rosario, left, and Sharrieff Baker say a tenant threatened them because they are gay.

“You wouldn’t know that Greenwich Village is 10 miles away,” said James Credle, 62, a Vietnam veteran who is working with about a dozen other activists to revive the Newark Pride Alliance, a group established three years ago after a 15-year-old lesbian, Sakia Gunn, was stabbed to death by a man who, the police said, was infuriated that she had rejected his advances. “People here feel like we don’t deserve to be alive. For us, it’s about survival,” Mr. Credle said, “and all this talk of gay marriage is just a luxury.”

The city has no gay community center, no gay pride parade, no established gay organizations; there are no bars devoted exclusively to gay or lesbian clientele. “Newark is like one big closet,” said Ron Saleh, a consultant to the

[John Edwards](#) presidential campaign, who moved here two years ago. “And there’s nothing going on for gay people. It’s like a desert.”

There are, however, a few hints of change. In June, Mayor [Cory A. Booker](#) became the first public official to embrace the issue by hoisting a rainbow flag over City Hall in recognition of Gay Pride Month. Yesterday, Gov. [Jon S. Corzine](#) was expected to attend a World AIDS Day event here. Last year, voters elected Dana Rone to the Municipal Council; she became the city’s first openly lesbian official when a newspaper, after her inauguration, reported on her sexual orientation.

And while many gay men and lesbians complain that they have been ridiculed and intimidated by the police, Garry F. McCarthy, the city’s police director, has begun requiring sensitivity training for all members of the force as part of biannual sessions that focus on sexual harassment.

Even those steps have met with resistance. When he presided over the raising of the rainbow flag, Mayor Booker said, he was stunned by the flood of angry phone calls to his office. “There’s a lot of silent pain in the city of Newark, and perpetrators of this pain — those who promote the bigotry and the alienation — must be confronted,” he said.

For a handful of gay activists in the city, the schoolyard shooting of four young people in August was a measure of that pain, if not of bigotry. They have been pressing law enforcement officials to investigate the shootings as a possible bias crime.

Mr. Credle, an organizer of Newark Pride Alliance, said that one of the teenagers arrested after the killings attended the same high school as three of the victims and may have thought they were gay because they hung around an openly gay crowd.

The police have said the killings were carried out during a robbery, but the Essex County prosecutor, Paula T. Dow, said investigators were still working to establish a motive.

James Harvey, the father of Dashon Harvey, one of the three who died in the schoolyard shootings, dismissed the suggestions that antigay bias played a role. “That’s so baloney, I don’t even want to give it a thought,” he said. “I’m just trying to get over my son being buried and gone from me.”

In some ways, the lack of a vibrant, organized gay community mirrors many other aspects of civic life in Newark, a city stunted by poverty and lacking the kind of comfortable middle class found in cities of similar size.

“We are an underdeveloped community in every area, so it is no surprise” that homophobia persists, said Ms. Rone.

Many churches in the city remain openly hostile to homosexuality.

Gary Paul Wright, executive director of the African American Office of Gay Concerns, a group that provides education and counseling on H.I.V. and AIDS, said his five-year effort to dispense AIDS educational material at local churches had been universally thwarted.

“There’s a whole lot of preaching about homosexuality and sin,” said Mr. Wright. “It really hurts and it makes me mad, but it also reinforces the stigma associated with

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Such institutional antipathy drives many people into lives marked by secrecy. Some turn to the Internet for connections. One site that is popular among black and Hispanic men here, Adam4Adam.com, has more than 500 active members in Newark; on a recent night, nearly 200 of them were online.

Not everyone feels the need to stay in the closet. June Dowell-Burton, 38, a social work student at the Newark campus of Rutgers University, said her neighbors did not seem bothered that she and her partner shared an apartment, a car and grocery shopping forays. “We don’t hide anything, and no one seems to mind,” she said.

Sharrieff Baker and his partner, Edwin Rosario, who own a house in the North Ward, said they had a very different experience when one of their tenants found out they were a couple. Last month, they said, the tenant tore up a shared bathroom, called them “faggots” and threatened to blow up their house. When they called 911, they said, Vincent Cordi, the responding police officer, appeared unconcerned and agreed only reluctantly to take their complaint. Back at the station house, they said, Officer Cordi sniggered with co-workers as he typed up the paperwork, at one point blurting out, “How do you spell ‘faggot’?”

When they returned home that day, they were attacked by the tenant in the hallway, they said; Officer Cordi responded to their 911 call and arrested all three men. Mr. Baker, who lost a front tooth in the skirmish, was charged with aggravated assault, as was the tenant; they both spent the weekend in jail. Mr. Rosario was not charged. Neither Officer Cordi nor officials in the Police Department responded to requests for comment.

Mr. Baker, who has filed a complaint with the internal affairs department, said he was especially angered by the Police Department’s refusal to designate the incident antigay. Newark, unlike many cities its size, does not compile data on antigay violence.

The day after he filed the complaint, Mr. Baker said, his car was towed from in front of his home. He suggested it was an act of vengeance; the police said it was removed for street cleaning.

Mr. Baker, 32, a real estate broker who moved to Newark from Jersey City last year, said that because of the incident, he and Mr. Rosario, a schoolteacher, want to move away. “I came here because I wanted to be part of Newark’s renaissance, but now I’m afraid even in my own house,” he said.

The Booker administration’s efforts to help establish a gay community center have been largely hamstrung by what veteran gay activists acknowledge are internal disagreements.

Then there is the apathy. When Laquetta Nelson tried to start a Newark chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, she gave up after a few months. “In the end, no one came to the meetings,” she said.

For now, the only refuge for gay people is in a nondescript building on the outskirts of downtown. Project Wow, as it is called, is a no-frills drop-in center run by the North Jersey Community Research Initiative, an organization that devotes most of its resources to research on AIDS drugs and free medical care. Project Wow draws a few dozen young people each night who come for counseling and H.I.V. prevention advice but mostly for the camaraderie and shelter from the city’s unsympathetic streets.

Alex Williams, Project Wow’s director, asked that the center’s location not be printed, noting that 15 of the center’s employees and clients had been attacked on their way to or from the building in the last six months.

Sitting in the lounge at the center, Tariq Pickens, 23, recalled how he and a friend dressed in drag were ambushed on the street by a group of men and women three years ago. During a few hellish moments, he said, they were slashed, punched, robbed and doused with lighter fluid, although the fuel failed to ignite. “I’ve had so many friends killed, beaten, raped, I can’t even count,” he said.

Kira Henry, too, has felt fear. Ms. Henry, 20, who is transgender, is taking a cooking class. When she walks to school in the morning, she said, she tries to look straight ahead and meet the inevitable taunts and catcalls with a forced smile. But when the bottles and bricks fly, she said, she knows how to fight — or sprint in six-inch heels.

“If you beat me up or shoot me,” she said, “I’m still going to be me.”

Like many of Project Wow’s clients, Willie Harden, 20, is homeless and jobless. He is also effectively orphaned, although his mother, a drug addict, is reputed to be somewhere in Jersey City.

Since aging out of foster care two years ago, Mr. Harden has lived at a series of shelters, the latest being Covenant House. He said he tried to hide his sexuality from strangers. The last thing he needed, he said, was more ridicule, or an uninvited beating.

“It’s hard living a double life,” he said. “It sounds crazy, but one day I’d like to walk down the street holding my boyfriend’s hand with nobody saying one bad word.”

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