



**LGBT
LIFE
CENTER**

LIFE SUPPORT

THE NEWSLETTER THAT DOES GOOD!
APRIL 2025

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2025

Upcoming Events

April

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	YOUTH MATTER: LGBTQ+ YOUTH GROUP [IN-PERSON] 6 PM	WOMEN'S HIV EMPOWERMENT GROUP [IN-PERSON] 11 AM	10	11	PRIDE 'N' SOBRIETY HAMPTON AA SUPPORT GROUP 7 PM
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	PRIDE PANTRY 201 @ 12:00PM & 5:30PM	22	23	DINING OUT FOR LIFE, HAMPTON ROADS!	25	MEN IN TRANSITION [VIRTUAL] 11 AM
27	28	29	30	<p>FOR MORE INFO GO TO: HTTPS://LGBTLIFECENTER.ORG/ EVENTS</p>		

ALL EVENTS AT 5360 ROBIN HOOD ROAD, NORFOLK, UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED



Sister Mary Joan and the Spark That Lit LIFE

WRITTEN BY EJ



In a quiet Norfolk church in the late 1980s, Sister Mary Joan Kentz was teaching sexual health to anyone who would listen—unusual work for a Catholic nun. But Sister Mary Joan wasn't your typical nun, and these weren't typical times. HIV was a stark reality, devastating communities quietly, painfully, and quickly. People whispered, afraid to say it out loud: AIDS. Sister Mary Joan had heard the whispers clearly enough to decide that something had to change.

From those bold conversations at Sacred Heart Church came a modest organization with a deceptively sweet acronym: CANDII—Children's AIDS Network Designed for Interfaith Involvement. It began as a hospice, caring for women and infants living with HIV, in a time where such a diagnosis was a death sentence.

More than three decades later, that tiny hospice has evolved into LGBT Life Center—a holistic organization woven into the fabric of Hampton Roads, serving thousands every year. Yet, its journey was anything but straightforward.

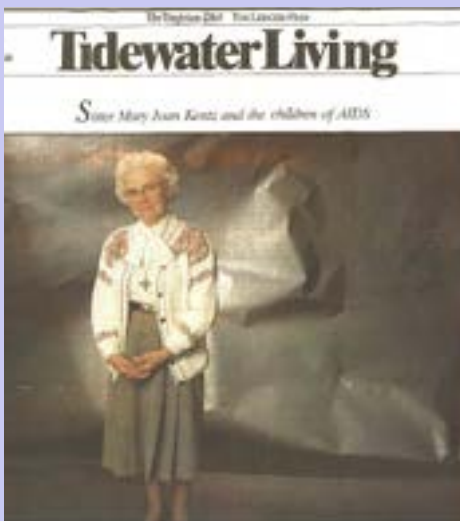
By 2005, HIV was changing. Advances in medical treatments dramatically reduced mother-to-child transmission. Survival, once uncertain, became expected—at least for those with resources. Yet, the nonprofit world sometimes lags behind progress, and CANDII's identity was tethered to a reality that no longer existed. A parallel organization, Full Circle AIDS Hospice Support, faced the same existential challenge: late-stage AIDS care was dwindling.

"We knew we had to change. People weren't dying the way they used to. And that's a good thing," says LGBT Life Center CEO, Stacie Walls, during a sit down where she explained the organization's history to me. They needed to broaden the mission: not just serve as end-of-life support, but as prevention, education, and comprehensive care.

Yet, despite new programs and services, stigma lingered. "Young people wouldn't walk through the door," Stacie explained. To survive and serve, the organization took a bold leap, rebranding itself as an inclusive LGBT community center, one that happened to specialize in HIV prevention and care. The shift worked—people came.

This "status-neutral" approach is now the backbone of the Life Center's philosophy. Whether someone is HIV-positive, at risk, or simply in need of support, everyone receives compassionate, stigma-free care. Housing became central, too, because, as Stacie passionately declares, "Housing is healthcare. If you don't have somewhere safe to sleep, how can you be healthy?"





The results are impressive: what began as a tiny \$16,000 housing program has become Virginia's largest provider of HIV housing assistance. Mental health, food pantries, support groups, education—they've built an ecosystem of care, adapting to meet the evolving needs of an increasingly diverse clientele.

But today, amid escalating political tensions, the Life Center is navigating uncertain waters. "It's scary," admits Stacie Walls bluntly. Nearly half their budget comes from grants, many federal. Those grants have restrictions—some painfully arbitrary. Grants can fund a bed but not dishes or furniture. They can provide housing but not marketing to reach people who desperately need it. And increasingly, grants are targets of political agendas that threaten LGBTQ+ communities directly.

"Project 2025 was no joke," Stacie Walls emphasizes, referencing the current administration's clearly communicated intentions to restrict funds, particularly impacting transgender and marginalized communities. The Center remains determinedly resistant, refusing to bend to threats of discrimination. "We're not changing anything until a court makes us," she insists defiantly.

Fundraising helps fill the gaps left by grants—events like Dining Out for Life, community partnerships, individual donations—all vital. It isn't easy, but it's necessary. Fundraising provides another vital resource: Visibility. We can't help people who don't know we exist.

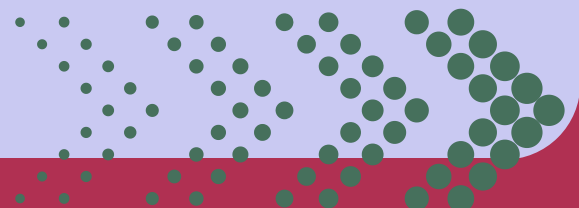
Thirty-six years after its founding, the Life Center is seeing a full-circle moment. While HIV remains a core focus, today's most pressing concerns are the mental health and isolation of LGBTQ+ youth and elders. Young people struggle with suicidal thoughts and family disconnection at rates frighteningly reminiscent of HIV's peak years. Elders, the original survivors, face new challenges around aging and healthcare. Both groups demand new, creative approaches.

Looking ahead feels risky in today's political landscape. "I used to plan five or ten years out," admits Stacie Walls, "but right now, I'm thinking three months at a time."

Yet despite uncertainties, optimism persists. "I want people to come here because it's joyful, affirming, and fun—not just when they're in crisis. And I want everyone else to realize we're here, even if they don't need us now. We need their voices."

What started in a small Norfolk church, born from whispers and urgent conversations, has grown into a quiet revolution—one that still whispers: we're here, and we'll help. In times of fear, stigma, or isolation, LGBT Life Center's message is unwaveringly clear: You are not alone.

Maybe it's fitting, then, that Sister Mary Joan started it all with something as simple and revolutionary as conversation. Because today, at its heart, the LGBT Life Center is still rooted in conversations—ones that listen, affirm, and fight for human dignity.



Sober and Seen: The Healing Power of Welcoming Recovery

WRITTEN BY SHAY

At Pride 'N' Sobriety, an Alcoholics Anonymous group hosted at LGBT Life Center's Hampton location, everyone is welcome regardless of identity. It meets from 7 pm to 8 pm every Saturday. The group is not directly affiliated with the Life Center or any other group, as it stands as an individual entity dedicated to supporting sobriety. While AA is built on a spiritual system and often gets confused for being a religious program, there are no requirements for adhering to a specific belief system; in fact, the sole requirement is the desire to become sober.

At 19 years old, one member of Pride 'N' Sobriety—who must remain anonymous in accordance with the nature of the program—attended their first AA meeting, which was not necessarily marketed specifically for LGBTQ+ individuals. They were terrified it wouldn't work because it was, in fact, a spiritual program and they had left religion. The alternatives were either continuing to live the destructive way they had been living or death, which wasn't entirely unappealing. They continued to attend meetings. At this time, the AIDS pandemic was just beginning with fear running rampant. While this individual was never kicked out of a meeting, they experienced hostility and snide comments. At only 19, this individual was younger than most others at the meetings—until they came to a dedicated queer meeting on the Southside. Here, there were younger queer members who offered a sense of community and belonging for the first time in this individual's life.

After a slew of meetings, sponsors, and sponsees, this individual has maintained over 40 years of sobriety. AA has saved thousands of lives, including their own. "We've reached a point where it's a life and death issue. We either do these things or we die, so we don't need rules because we have a death sentence hanging over us." AA, as this individual explained, is an anarchy as it doesn't have any requirements or rules. Nobody is required to pay dues and nobody can be kicked out for any reason. AA also exists as a democracy, as everyone in the room has a voice in matters that affect the program—even if they're drunk. The program is designed to allow the greatest number of people possible to achieve and maintain sobriety.

The most important thing that this individual wanted to share was that "if you're having problems with alcohol, there is an answer and a place." Each meeting sees roughly 20 attendees, with at least one newcomer at their first ever meeting. Many members utilize AA in place of NA and are welcomed with open arms. The individual encouraged anyone struggling with alcohol or drugs to "...give it a try. Try it for 90 days. If they don't like it, we'll refund their misery."



I am responsible. When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there. And for that, I am responsible.



The Future of Health Is Here— and It's Led by These Voices

WRITTEN BY KYLE

April is National Minority Health Month, and we're celebrating by spotlighting four individuals whose identities and leadership are helping reshape what health, equity, and justice look like for all of us.

Layel Camargo (They/Them)- Earth day

Layel Camargo (they/them), is a trans indigenous climate justice organizer and storyteller from the ancestral land Kumayaay, also known as southern California and the north west part of Mexico. Over the last two decades, Layel has used their perspective as a gender queer indigenous person of Yaqui, Yoeme and Mayo descent to fuel their environmentalism and cultural activism. Layel helped co-found Shelterwood collective, a BIPOC, Queer led 900 acre forest restoration project/community forest and retreat center dedicated to fostering community and healing people and ecosystems through active stewardship and community engagement. Folks who partake in the collective "In my work as a land steward," they say "it is about creating a place and safe haven for artists to be able to come, caretake the land, connect to a physical place and be able to say this is my home and I belong and to deepen their commitment to protecting the earth."



Layel is also a podcaster and creator of the storytelling platform "Climate Woke" which has highlighted the works for 500+ artists and climate activists of color. They've also worked with the Tribeworks Cooperative and was named a Fixer on the Grist 2020 Fixers List. "I am a climate warrior, I was born into a society where I had no other choice but to have to fight for our species and survival. When I think about who I am, I am connected to the far end of the next seven generations in trying to preserve and build a world that's gonna be sustainable for them."

Shira Hassan (she/her)- Arab American heritage month; Also some overlap with alcoholism awareness month with her harm reduction work

Shira Hassan is a queer Arab-American abolitionist organizer and social worker whose activism focuses on Liberatory Harm Reduction and mutual aid efforts. She is an artist, a creator of zines, and the former executive director of the Young Women's Empowerment Project, an organization and grassroots movement building project led by and for young people of color that have current or former experience in the sex trade and street economies. She is the founder and principal consultant for Just Practice, a capacity-building project for organizations and community members working at the intersection of transformative justice, harm, reduction, and collective liberation. She is the author of *Saving Our Own Lives*, an anthology of essays that tells the stories of how sex workers, Black, Indigenous, and people of color, queer folks, trans, gender non-conforming, and two-spirit people are – and have been - building systems of change and support outside the societal frameworks of oppression and exploitation.



"Harm reduction teaches us how to practice the politic [that] no one is disposable, demanded by Transformative Justice, another strategy developed by BIPOC searching for solutions to end violence without using state systems. Liberatory Harm Reduction gives us the concrete tools to make sure that the marches, protests, rallies, campaigns are truly led by those of us who are experiencing the most harm from the systems we are living under. Harm reduction knows that we are not the problem-we are the solution."

Zakia McKensy (she/ her)- HIV awareness month

Zakia McKensy is a healthcare educator, Trans and HIV activist and drag performer located in Richmond, Virginia. In 2015, Zakia founded Nationz Foundation, an organization dedicated to caring for communities most at risk of or affected by HIV/AIDS. Not only does Nationz supply testing and educational resources for those with HIV/AIDS, but it also runs a food pantry and hosts support groups for queer people in the Richmond area, acting as a one stop shop resource for anyone in need. Having been motivated by a close friend contracting HIV almost 20 years ago, McKensy decided to educate herself and become active in this work so that she can help others who might be struggling.

According to the CDC, 42% of 1,608 transgender women the agency interviewed in 2019 and early 2020 said they had HIV. Black transgender women had the highest rate of HIV among that group, with 62% saying they had tested positive for the virus. Gay men also represent a disproportionate number of HIV cases in the U.S. The CDC reported in 2018 that 81% of men who contracted HIV had sexual contact with another man beforehand.

Zakia is also a drag performer, model, and beauty pageant winner, and has used her creative platform to spread the word on HIV/AIDS awareness in the community.

“I want to see a future where we continue to thrive, where we continue to see people that look like us in spaces that we never thought we could inhabit so that those who follow can too be inspired for greatness.”

Devon Price (He/ him)- Autism awareness month

Dr. Devon Price is trans autistic social psychologist, blogger, and author best known for his books, *Unmasking Autism: Discovering the New Faces of Neurodiversity* and *Laziness Does Not Exist*. In his writing and teaching, Dr. Price explores themes such as autistic identity, trans identity, masking, the mental health consequences of masking, and the process of unmasking. His work in the autism and queer community has broadened the umbrella of what it means to identify with these terms and challenges their modern misconceptions, while also highlighting their overlap. Recent studies have shown that LGBT+ folks are nearly 6 times more likely to be diagnosed with autism. While conservatives often use this as political ammo to wield at the queer community, Dr. Price's work highlights the beauty in our multi- identities. “It's meaningless to question whether a trans Autistic person would have “still” been trans had they not been born neurodiverse, because Autism is such a core part of who we are. Without our disability (or our gender identity) we'd be entirely different people. There is no separating these aspects of ourselves from our personhood or personality. They're both core parts.”



Dr. Price is a staunch proponent of self diagnosis and explicitly highlights the experiences of queer, BIPOC, and/or low income autistic who often do not have access to an official medical diagnosis due to financial and societal barriers. Price's newest book, called *Laziness Does Not Exist*, challenges our modern concepts of laziness, productivity and self-worth, and is a sign of other mental health issues.





The Secret Queer Archive

GROWING ON A NORFOLK TREE

Written by Grace



Arbor day and earth day are right around the corner and to celebrate, I went to the local wishing tree. It's located on the Elizabeth River Trail in the Ghent Loop. It was more poignant than I was expecting; I was going to fill my article with fun tree facts and the history of earth day. But what I found was something very different.

As you walk up to the wishing tree you're first struck by how many bits of paper are actually on it. There are little tags strung onto rope to make huge fluffy garlands. Someone has emptied out mini light bulbs and stuffed them with wishes or dried flowers. There are little tins and dreamcatchers high up in the branches and boxes nestled between the roots. None of it is cohesive or planned and, in all honesty, it's not the prettiest to look at. But what stuck with me were all the names. Mary+Caroline in a sharpie heart, Carrie Georgia, Brittany+CeCe on a piece of exposed wood. Why were all of these queer-sounding couples on here?

The latest Gallup poll says that 9.3% of Americans self-identified as LGBTQ+, and it's estimated that only 3.5% of adult Virginians identify as such. This baffled me, why would this little tree in a residential street have such a large percentage of queer couples on it? Of course, I could never know for sure without actually meeting these people, but I felt for sure I had stumbled upon something. I had to sit with this for a few minutes until all of a sudden it hit me. I remember I was glancing around the parking lot the other day trying to see if it looked like a friendly enough crowd to hold my partner's hand, and it all clicked. Queer people aren't always allowed a public declaration of affection. A wishing tree is a perfect spot for this. Anonymous, public, forever. You can't get sharpie out of tree without sandpaper after all.

I was suddenly reminded of a hike I had gone on with my sister last year. She had found a little roadside waterfall you could walk to, and on the way there she found one of those bridges where people put padlocks marked with initials or names on and throw the key into the river. I remember being struck then too at how many queer-sounding couples we could find. It was the middle of nowhere Indiana and we hadn't seen a rainbow flag for days. But, I had a hypothesis, and this was another point in my favor. Maybe the locals had nowhere safe to go besides these little backwoods trail. Maybe they had no other place to display the love they held for their partner outside of Luke+Jacob scratched into the side of a Masterlock. And that suddenly made the squat little banged up tree all the more beautiful. I could overlook all the old beer cans and trash, the waste bags and glass shards. This was a testament to the resilience of our people. Even with nowhere to go, Love always finds a way to blossom.

I stood there with only the surveyor across the street as company and reflected on how fortunate I was to be there. Where else can you find such a declaration of love and hope? The general consensus of the wishers seemed to be for other people: world peace, more kindness, grandma to get better, and respect for our fellow humans. I think people have innate empathy and kindness, and this little phenomenon brought tears to my eyes. Even in the face of everything going on in the world, queer people still make sure their legacy will live on. Were the wishes for the love they held to live on forever? Maybe, but I do know that the hope I found there will.

Rooted in Difference:

TREES TEACH US ABOUT THRIVING OUTSIDE THE NORM

Written by Grace



Arbor day is the 25th and earth day is the 22nd this month, so I'm going to tell you all about trees! Trees as we know them evolved about 385 million years ago. And there are thousands of different varieties. But, not everyone agrees on the definition of a tree- some definitions require it to be perennial, and have an elongated trunk that supports branches. But, that excludes palm trees, bananas, and bamboo! Some definitions are even tighter- they have to be a certain height, or produce viable lumber. The only thing people can agree on is that there isn't a proper definition.

Trees are one of the most useful plants to our earth. They take in carbon dioxide from the air, their deep root systems stabilize the ground to prevent soil erosion, and they work to provide habitats for local wildlife. And that's just a few of the things they do! One of my favorite trees is the mangrove tree: it's one of only two types of tree that can grow in standing water. (The cypress palm is the other one.) Their roots are so sturdy that they can hold up to the forces of hurricanes and tsunamis. They are beneficial to have on the coast to prevent property damage when hurricanes come through.

They even tolerate saltwater! Although they mainly live in brackish water, they tolerate the 4% salt content of the ocean as well. They even can handle up to 9% when evaporation in the summer concentrates the salt. Mangrove trees evolved separately into their current form all around the world with no common ancestors. That's what's called convergent evolution. They are just so well suited to their habitat and such an efficient organism, that they independently evolved about 70 times!



Unfortunately due to climate change and human factors, trees are rapidly disappearing. But, there are things you can do. Plant a native tree in your yard, workplace, or park.

Support local reforestation projects and educate yourself. If you want to take a look at all the issues the trees in the Chesapeake Bay watershed face, click this link:

<https://www.cbf.org/issues/habitat/trees.html>

If you want some help choosing the right native tree, check out this list:

<https://homesteadgardens.com/top-native-trees-for-the-chesapeake-bay-area/>

And here's a step-by-step guide to start planning your planting!

<https://www.chesapeakebay.net/action/protect-the-bay/how-to-choose-and-use-native-plants>

Know someone who could plant LOTS of trees? The Virginia Department of Forestry sells native saplings at cost:

<https://buyvatrees.com/shop/>

Check your local bulletins or gardening programs! They will have info about how you can get involved in your community.
Happy planting!





LGBT LIFE CENTER



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<https://lgbtlifecenter.org/blog>



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OUR MISSION

LGBT LIFE CENTER IS A TRUSTED LEADER THAT STRENGTHENS THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITIES AND ALL INDIVIDUALS LIVING WITH HIV THROUGH IMPROVING HEALTH AND WELLNESS, SUPPORTING FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY, AND PROVIDING TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY.

