

PFLAG-Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

Loving Jacksonville for a Quarter Century

In 1990, Jacksonville, like many other southern cities, was not a welcoming community for gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people. Though the city's gay community had openly celebrated gay pride since 1984, there were almost no support organizations and certainly no legal protections for LGBT residents. Those who were gay, or had family members who were gay, found it difficult to access good information and equally difficult to find others with whom they might have common interests.

"There was no internet, no social media. You couldn't just look up information the way you can now," said Frieda Saraga. "You couldn't go to the library because they either didn't carry information about homosexuality or they made you feel very self-conscious about asking for it. There was no way to easily reach out and connect with other people with similar concerns."

Saraga was then in her 50s, married to her husband, Leonard, and the mother of five children, three of whom were gay. Her son, Scott, who was in his early 30s, was particularly attuned to the challenges he and his gay friends faced.

Scott Saraga had grown up in Jacksonville, helping out in his father's clothing store along with his mother and siblings. Scott had the usual network of friends and acquaintances, but when he came out in his late teens, he encountered the deep, anti-gay hostility that was commonplace at that time.

As he navigated this new world, he learned of a national organization -- Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, or PFLAG -- that had been offering safe spaces and networks of support for parents with lesbian and gay children for about a decade.

"He said it would be a great idea if families had a place to talk," recalled Frieda. "He really urged me to start a local chapter."

PFLAG had been around since 1973, started by Jeanne Manford, who had marched with her son in New York's Christopher Street Liberation Day March and been overwhelmed by pleas for help. She started a support group and, by the early 1980s, when PFLAG was mentioned by "Dear Abby" in one of her advice columns, the organization received more than 7,000 requests for information.

For Frieda Saraga, starting a local chapter of PFLAG seemed like a good thing to do, though she was more focused on helping people than starting an organization.

"I didn't know you had to call anyone to start a chapter. I thought you could just start a chapter. So I, together with my husband Leonard and Marilyn Logan, a straight ally friend of Scott, started the chapter," she said. "And then we thought, 'Oh, I guess we should contact the national organization.'"

We did that, too, and in 1992, PFLAG Jacksonville became part of the national PFLAG organization.



Frieda Saraga, left, presents a scholarship check to Bethany Martinez at an Annual Scholarship banquet.

"That gave us credibility," Frieda said, "We were listed in their materials as being the Jacksonville area chapter."

The First Meetings

When PFLAG first started holding meetings in 1992, Saraga was cautious. As word got out about her family's involvement, they received death threats and hate calls, she said. And she realized that other families might be having similar experiences.

"People were afraid," she said. "We had to reassure them that if they came to the meeting they would be ok."

Rather than meeting in homes, the group met in offices from the outset. A local female insurance executive knew of the work Frieda was doing and offered the use of her Southside office after business hours. For years, PFLAG met there.

"We wanted a neutral site and we wanted to be sure people felt they were in a safe place," Frieda said. "We didn't advertise where we were meeting. We would give people a phone number and they would call to find out about the meetings."

Despite the pressures, Scott encouraged his mother to continue with the work -- and she was willing, and motivated.

"When I saw how much some young kids were suffering because their parents didn't accept them, it broke my heart," she said. "It was a lot of emotions -- people had had no place to say what they felt."

In the early years, there might be 10-15 people at a meeting -- "mostly mothers -- just a few dads," Frieda said. There was no agenda or 12-step-program; the plan was "just help each other."

One of the mothers was Linda Kolosky, whose son was gay.

"She came in crying, crying, crying," Frieda recalled. "He was her only child. She had wanted grandchildren, the whole thing." Gay adoption was illegal in Florida. "Things were so different."

As was their practice, the members of PFLAG talked with, and listened to, Kolosky. And their advice was simple: love your child. All the while, PFLAG was loving the parent. Among those first members were Debbi Carter and Sue Birks who were wonderful to speak to other mothers.

"You love them through it," Frieda said. "You have to allow them to be where they are. You just had to be there for them. We would never tell anyone they were wrong. We let them express and in that expressing we talked it out."

Having a group of peers with similar experiences was key, Frieda said.

"The biggest thing was that people saw there were others like them. They saw that I had three out of five gay children and most of them had only one and they suddenly felt so grateful!"

Developing the Organization

In a relatively short time, PFLAG Jacksonville became a formal organization -- it received its tax-exempt status from the Internal Revenue Service in 1994 -- that was publicly active.

Kolosky was among the first to encourage the organization's activism. She connected the organization with Daily Billboards, a Jacksonville business that owns 16 14' x 48' outdoor billboards whose messages can change daily. Kolosky convinced the company to carry the message: WE LOVE OUR GAY LESBIAN BISEXUAL CHILDREN. PFLAG JACKSONVILLE.

It was a bold step both for PFLAG and for Daily Billboards, Frieda recalled. The company took a lot of heat, she said.

"When we went to them and asked them to add TRANSGENDER to the message, they said, 'We've taken so much heat already, why not?'" Money was raised for the first billboard years by entertainers at local gay bar Metro at special fund raisers, a practice that continues today.

The billboard now reads: WE LOVE OUR GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER CHILDREN. PFLAG JACKSONVILLE with our phone number (904) 737-3329.

In 1996, the leadership of PFLAG Jacksonville attended a meeting in New Orleans, where they met a group of young people who benefited from college scholarships. As the leaders returned to Jacksonville, they decided to try to raise funds so that they might offer scholarships for Jacksonville students.

Initially, scholarships were \$500 in 1996 and 1997 to three to five recipients, but by 2003 fundraising efforts were strong enough to increase the amount to \$1,000 per scholarship. Today, PFLAG provides 15-20 \$2,000 scholarships annually. Since 2006, PFLAG has provided more than 250 scholarships totaling more than \$331,800.

Applications are reviewed by an independent panel of educators who are volunteers. Applicants must live in Baker, Clay, Duval, Nassau or St. Johns counties, have been admitted to a post-secondary school, have participated in activities to benefit the LGBT community and completed an application.

They also must be out. "I have counseled students and told them, 'If you are not out and your parents are not willing to help with your education don't do this, because your name may appear in the media and what we can provide is not worth it,'" Frieda said.

Scholarship recipients are of various ages: some are high school graduates; others are adults seeking to return to school. "We even had a 50-year-old who wanted to go to divinity school," Frieda recalled.

Today, the scholarship program provides the primary impetus for PFLAG Jacksonville's fundraising and the majority of the organization's expenses.

Since 2006, PFLAG Jacksonville has raised more than \$340,000 with almost two thirds of that being used in direct support of the scholarship program.

In addition, PFLAG Jacksonville provides pamphlets purchased from the national organization on gay, bisexual, and transgender education, and conducts some educational events. Today at age 83, Frieda personally provides for the Department of Health HIV testing and counseling for inmates at the Duval County jail, combining her grandmotherly charm with her frank, but never crass, language.

And PFLAG still holds regular monthly meetings for parents.

Looking to the Future

At the peak, PFLAG's monthly meetings might attract 30-35 attendees, Frieda said. But today's landscape is quite different.

The internet allows people to access information more easily and privately. Social media helps people find others with similar interests. And, while Jacksonville remains the only major city in Florida that does not provide human rights protections based on sexual orientation, it is a far more welcoming community than it was in 1990.

"There isn't the need that there once was," Frieda said.

Garry Bevel, who is the current PFLAG board chair, agreed.

"PFLAG sprouted in an age where these meetings needed to be held in private," he said. "Now, everyone is a little bit more out. I see us serving families in new and different ways."

With the help of a \$20,000 grant from the LGBT Community Fund for Northeast Florida, PFLAG has listened to constituents and is developing a new strategic plan that will position the organization to broaden its reach while staying true to its origins.

"I see us serving families in new and different ways," Bevel said, in particular, finding ways to reach out to families as opposed to waiting for families to come to PFLAG.

At the same time, the board is thinking about organizational sustainability, as the generation that founded PFLAG begins to retire. "We started as a support group and a family," Bevel said, and now we are asking what does it mean to be that and to be a business? Do we need staff? How do we keep going?"

For Frieda, there will always be needs to be met. Families still come to her, many driven by the challenges of religion. "I just go back to the basis of religion, LOVE, and let them think about it," she said. And there are certain topics on which PFLAG can be helpful: Being trans is something that some have difficulty understanding and they are looking for information. We have booklets available to families or organizations.

With Bevel as the new PFLAG board chair and co-chair of the scholarship program, Frieda is taking more of a back seat. "I didn't want this chapter to be about me."

Throughout the work, her husband and children have been extremely supportive, of her and of PFLAG. Son Scott died in 2014 at the age of 55 and many of the tributes to him supported the PFLAG Scholarship Program.

"I've become something of a mother figure in this community," she admits, but the needs are much greater than her persona.

"There will always be a need and things will just flow," she said. "You can never do without getting."

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