

## Over the Rainbow: A Portrait of South Bay's LGBT Community

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Two weeks after the Supreme Court ruling in late June declaring unconstitutional Proposition 8, the 2008 California ballot measure banning same-sex marriage, some 50 patrons at the Dolphin Bar in Redondo Beach happened to be at the right place at the right time.

Steve Bopp, a 65-year-old Redondo Beach native, and his 36-year-old boyfriend Gilbert Gonzalez quietly faced each other on the dim corner stage with Omar Rivas, a longtime Dolphin bartender, presiding over them. Minutes ago, the couple had approached Rivas about signing their marriage certificate. They had decided the ceremony would come at a later date.

But Rivas, 36, who was ordained some 10 years ago and recently began officiating ceremonies for couples who can't otherwise afford it, suggested they tie the knot in front of everyone right then inside the Dolphin Bar. They turned off the jukebox, and the bar's attention shifted to the two men on the stage.

"I got picked up here, got proposed here, and got married here," Bopp says later, all smiles. "It was supposed to be a one-night-stand."

### Meeting place

The Dolphin Bar is the only openly gay bar in the South Bay, a region of 105 square miles encompassing 19 cities with a population of nearly 900,000. It was once one of four gay establishments in the area, with dance club J.R. Briens just down the street.

The Dolphin, a small neighborhood dive bar on Artesia Boulevard, is easy to miss – especially without its signature rainbow flag hanging outside. It was torn down a few months ago. "It was drunk people trying to do photo opps, nothing malicious," says Brandon Gresham, the Dolphin's weekday bartender.

That's not to say malicious incidents haven't occurred. In its 40-year history, the Dolphin and its patrons have been on the receiving end of eggs, prank calls, bricks and one Halloween night, a pumpkin.

Gresham, 37, is the face behind the bar Sunday through Wednesday. He's on a first-name basis with the family of regulars that's materialized over the years – some 50 locals, about a dozen of whom come by four to five times a week. It's one of those bars, he explains, where you see the same faces most weeks and they ask how your mom is doing.

"It's a good little community, and everyone's friendly and nice," he says. "It's a little different than the Hollywood scene because everybody is very neighborly and friendly here and care about you."

But the mellow, familiar scene and biweekly karaoke nights leave more to be desired, particularly for the younger locals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. When the weekend comes, many make the trek out to Long Beach, West Hollywood or even Silver Lake and Venice, where the LGBT community and nightlife are considerably more varied and well-established.

Because a standard night out usually involves drinking alcohol, explains 33-year-old Justin Raines, he faces the same dilemmas every time: How far do I want to drive? Do I want to stay and drink, and how much can I drink if I have to drive home? Often, the commute back home would usually have to wait until the morning after. Taking a cab that far is inconceivable, he adds.

“The thing is, as a gay man, I know that the gay community is here,” Raines says. He has several social networking apps on his iPhone – Growlr, Scruff – which by location shows “every gay man who also has those apps, for miles.”

“So you know that they’re there, and they’re everywhere,” he says. “So where do they go for a good time?”

Raines, a music composer originally from New Mexico, came out of the closet six years ago, prompted by younger brother’s sudden death. “I realized that life is short and I had to start living my life the way I want to,” he says. About two years ago, after ending his first serious relationship with a man in Vegas, where he was attending grad school, Raines packed his bags and moved to California, joining another brother in Redondo Beach.

Early last year, a stranger on one of the gay social apps told Raines about the Los Angeles Gay Freedom Band, a concert ensemble based in Hollywood and the second-oldest gay concert band in the world. Desperate to connect, he joined as a tuba player and seven months later became the conductor. He leads the Tuesday night rehearsals at the Hollywood Lutheran Church.

Raines, who favors the varied niches of Long Beach’s gay community, says he eventually wants to settle down. But the few outlets he uses to meet other gays in the South Bay – whether through an online-based South Bay gay singles meet-up group or weekends at Dolphin Bar — have not taken him far. He’s made a few friends who he’ll meet for dinner or drinks a few times a month.

“It’s the community itself why I’m staying here, not the gay community,” he says. “People need to congregate out here, for the love of god.”

## Crossover

On a Sunday afternoon in July, the South Bay LGBT Center is throwing a luau-themed fundraiser at the Dolphin Bar. It’s 4:30 p.m., a half hour into the event. Rivas, donning a rainbow lei around his wrist, is manning the bar. “It’s starting off kind of slow,” he says.

A mellow acoustic melody playing overhead, the grungy bar is uncharacteristically peppered with bright-colored paper flower centerpieces, leis of red and rainbow and coconut bras laid out on the pool table. About a dozen people are scattered about,

predominantly older men. Quiet conversations buzz in twos or threes. Trays of shredded chicken, salad, fried rice and stirred veggies remain largely untouched, covered under foil. A woman eats alone at the bar, watching a Justin Timberlake flick silently playing on the TV screen hanging above.

Jim Dawson, the Center's treasurer, donning a bright pink T-shirt and rainbow leis around his neck, is posted near the entrance with a cash box where he's collecting \$20 donations. He's originally from Kansas City, where he first met his husband Wayne Flottman nearly 60 years ago. Now at ages 77 and 78, the married couple lives together in their Torrance home, their front window flanked with "No on Prop 8" and marriage equality posters.

"People don't make an issue of it," Flottman says.

The couple moved to the South Bay in 1987, when the gay bar scene in the area was thriving. There was J.R. Briens, the popular dance club down the street from Dolphin, El Capitan in Hawthorne, the Annex on La Brea and Paddleboard 2 on Pacific Coast Highway. They also arrived on the cusp of an AIDS epidemic that would hit the community hard, particularly among gay men who frequented bath houses. "They were dropping like flies," recalls Dennis F., a Dolphin regular who says he lost nearly 30 friends he knew from J.R. Briens during the epidemic.

Dawson and Flottman quickly became plugged into the community, taking part in founding the South Bay LGBT Center, known then as just the South Bay Center, in 1989. The Center's first location was a small space on Artesia Boulevard in Redondo Beach, posted midway between Dolphin Bar and J.R. Briens. Despite the close proximity, the crowds at the bar scene and the Center rarely overlapped.

"I saw this divide between the people who came to the center and the people who came to the bar," Dawson explains. "Wayne and I were probably the only ones to float back and forth. I've always been supportive of gay community centers, but we've always been bar people."

Since last year, the two worlds have been colliding more frequently, thanks to Rivas joining the board of the Center. Rivas, a bartender at the Dolphin for nearly eight years, says since gay marriage became legal in California, his goal has been to bring attention to the Center.

"We're trying to get some new blood onto the board and hopefully some of the old timers can sit back and watch," Flottman adds.

### Humble beginnings

Torrance resident Dottie Wine has never been a bar person.

In 1989, she had just gotten out of a relationship and into another, relocating from Silver Lake to Redondo Beach. During this time, a culture of closetedness was rampant among South Bay adults, she remembered, due to the prominence of the aerospace industry and its ties to the U.S. Defense Department. Gay and lesbian employees feared being outed at

the risk of losing their security clearance, required for promotions and climbing the ladder in a classified environment.

“Because of so much closetedness, there weren’t really gathering spots other than bars,” says Wine, 68. “And if you had any problems with smoke or alcohol, you just didn’t go to the bars. So you relied on social circles.”

Being new in town, Wine clung to a few local friends she had met through a gay-rights organization in L.A. One of them was turning 50, and she wanted to invite the entire local lesbian community to her birthday party. So she advertised it in “Lesbian News,” an LA-based publication, listing her phone number next to a blurb that read, “If you’re tired of driving every Friday night to go some place to socialize, come to my 50th birthday party at my house in Redondo Beach.”

“She got over 50 calls,” Wine recalls.

This marked the beginning of an impressive operation. The birthday girl and her partner began hosting Sunday afternoon tea parties – calling it “Women’s Tea” – where the women would gather, mingle, meet new friends or potential dates. With a dollar collected from each attendee, the hosts purchased name tags, refreshments and postage, with which they’d send out notices about the next time and place of the gathering.

It didn’t take long before the hosts introduced activity sign-up sheets, where the women were encouraged to leave their names and phone numbers under an activity of choice, like watching a movie or going hiking. Then the hosts would make copies of the lists and mail them to those on the respective lists.

Here was example of the closetedness of the community, Wine says. “Nobody shared addresses except with the hosts.”

More than anything else, Wine was interested in starting an organization or entity of sorts for South Bay’s gay residents. She created a sign-up sheet relaying this vague ambition, and 11 women, including the hosts, put their names down.

At the first planning meeting in July of 1989, the team of women decided first and foremost that whatever it was going to be, it had to be co-gender. Men had more money, more political connections – “still do,” Wine says, “so we said we’ll tell every gay man we know, but nobody really knew a gay man in the South Bay. It turned out I did.”

Wine brought on board the Center’s current treasurer Jim Dawson (the only founding member other than Wine to remain involved today) who joined a handful of other gay men reached by radio ads, fliers and word of mouth. The first official meeting at a city-owned recreational hall in Knob Hill the following month had an unprecedented turnout of more than 50 people. After hours of surveys and discussion, the choices were narrowed down between a gay bookstore and a community organization. The latter won out.

“The reason was, people were tired of driving long distances and this was before gas was unaffordable,” Wine says. “People just didn’t want to drive out of town every time they wanted to go do something. That was the beginning – humble, just plain-old what’s the need, let’s do something.”



Milestones in gay rights chronicled at the South Bay LGBT Center.

The South Bay Gay and Lesbian Community Organization incorporated the following year, occupying a small space on Artesia Boulevard, and later was incorporated as a center.

Today, the South Bay LGBT Center sits inconspicuously tucked between a flooring shop and a massage parlor in a small Torrance plaza. The only giveaway from afar is a rainbow flag that hangs low above the entrance. A few steps closer, a plain sign above the door reads in black print, “South Bay LGBT Center.”

Inside, a narrow hallway leads to a modest common room. On its plain white walls hang white florescent lamps on one side, shelves packed with VHS tapes on the other, newspaper front pages chronicling major milestones in LGBT rights, and an old TV set.

Run by a four-member board with the help of five regular volunteers, the Center is aging, its participation low.

“We have a bell curve,” Wine says, explaining that a heavy concentration of visitors are over the age of 60. “For some time we had students come over from the El Camino campus. I think we’re just plateaued at the moment. We’re hoping to get some more people to help with leadership positions, to bring some energy back into the effort.”

Attendance varies from two to 20 for the center’s regular functions: Friday night drop-ins, ranging from game nights to potlucks, as well as Monday night women’s support group meetings, Wednesday night transgender support meetings, and the most recent addition, bi-monthly bisexual support meetings.

“They’re having a little bit more struggle getting attendance,” Wine says of the latter. “It’s still a bigger closet, I think. You can hide as a bisexual but sometimes it’s really hard to hide as a transgender person.”

### Shared experience

On this particular Wednesday evening at the Center, Rita Loy, 59, is donning dangly pink diamond earrings, a pink floral top and a long black floral skirt. Tall, square-shouldered and vibrant, Loy has pulled her long grey hair into a ponytail, looking on from behind gold-framed glasses.

“One thing that we are *not* is a dating service,” she says, prompting chuckles. The Center’s transgender support group has the floor tonight, and nine individuals, including Loy and Cathy, her wife of 26 years, are sitting in a circle around the common room on worn tan leather chairs. For about three hours every week, the group comes together in a safe, honest and sometimes intensely personal discussion about being transgender, when one’s gender identity does not match the sex assigned at birth.

Each has his or her own unique story but share, or have shared, similar struggles — those of a confused childhood, a repressed puberty, a foray into drugs or other forms of distraction, a fight for self-acceptance and acceptance from family and friends. Some are here to talk about their own experiences, others to better understand a loved one’s.

Keith W., a middle-aged career naval officer from Torrance, came out to his first meeting three weeks ago after his 25-year-old daughter Dani, who’s undergoing a male-to-female transition, was hospitalized for depression. He tells the group today that as they together discussed three weeks ago, he emailed his daughter asking what pronoun she’d like to be referred as and what name she’d like to be called.

“Wow, I couldn’t believe how right on you guys were,” he says. Dani, who lives in San Francisco, responded right away, “in seventh heaven” about her father’s newfound respect and sensitivity. The past six years of his daughter’s transition has been a period of transition for him too, he says, as a straight man raised in a hetero-normative military family. “What it really is – it’s a problem with accepting and dealing with what the gay community is. It was my problem.”

“I think it’s huge that you did that on your own,” says Jasper V., a reserved, articulate transman from Gardena. With a buzz cut and tattoo sleeves poking out from his T-shirt, he shares that his own family still refers to him using the wrong pronoun. “It stings a little bit, but I understand where they’re coming from.”

Loy, who is moderating the discussion tonight, has rarely missed a meeting. Born and raised in Redondo Beach, she always felt different from her peers, though she couldn’t pinpoint why. Throughout her early formative years in school, she struggled to make friends who stuck around for more than a few years.

“I got kidded for being different,” she tells the group. “It took me a number of years to realize what it was, and even then I sure as hell wouldn’t admit to anybody.”

What she couldn’t admit to anybody, including herself, was that she felt misplaced in her body. She hated getting her haircut so often. She repressed puberty almost completely, during which her voice was becoming deeper, stature more defined. She didn’t understand what this meant.

Loy went on to attend El Camino College, then Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, where she met Cathy through mutual friends. The two dated for seven years before tying the knot in 1987.

About three years ago, Loy reached a boiling point. She was ready to commit suicide, but she realized that Cathy wouldn’t know why. So Loy walked into her wife’s room and told her the truth.

“I said, ‘Dear, I think I’m a transsexual,’” Loy recalls.

By this time, the couple was about 24 years into their marriage. That previous year, Loy pierced her ears and began buying women’s clothes for herself, showing gradual signs of transitioning. At this time, Cathy said she knew her husband was different – “we couldn’t pinpoint whether he was gay or a cross dresser” – but the admission completely blindsided her.

“It was such a shock at first,” Cathy says, “then it was upsetting. I married a guy and now it turns out I married a girl. There was quite a bit of confusion for a couple months, but I did take the time to do research and try to understand what’s going on.”

In December 2011, Loy dialed up a gender therapist. Not long after, she began dressing in women’s clothes and began aligning her appearance with her true gender identity. She remembers initially drawing a few strange looks, but at that point didn’t care. She announced her transition to family and friends and officially changed her name to Rita Loy, though, Cathy notes, one neighbor she’s known since childhood still refuses to stop calling her by her old name.

“So many years of knowing you a certain way and you almost give them a pass,” Jasper says. “It’s like...they can’t grasp it.”

The key, Keith offers, is education. Oftentimes, people don’t realize just how insensitive or hurtful their actions are. “A group like this, it makes a big difference.”

Married with kids

The year before they tied the knot, Redondo Beach residents Sylvia and Karey invented a special last name for the family they would start together: *Dosamantes*, a Spanish word for “two loves.”

The couple wed at a Downey courthouse in 2008, just days before Proposition 8, a California ballot initiative amending the state constitution and instituting a ban on same-sex marriage, went into effect that November. At the time, Sylvia was five months pregnant with the couple’s twins, Oliver and Delilah, now 4-and-a-half.

They were luckier than others. Because their ceremony took place during the seven-month window that gay marriage was allowed in California, their union had legal standing.

“It was a really big deal for us,” Sylvia says of the wedding day. “I didn’t expect it. It was emotional because I felt like all of a sudden we had all these rights and I felt like it was a really big privilege.”

The couple was together for 10 years before getting married, the last few in a domestic partnership.

“Marriage is something that everybody understands,” Sylvia says. “Civil union, domestic partners, all those terms are vague and people don’t get it. People understand the big M word – it’s been going on for centuries and it’s not something that needs to be explained.”

“I found once we got married, I’d say Karey is my wife and people don’t have questions about it,” she continues. “That has been really liberating. Frankly, answering a million questions about what we were was tedious and always a reminder that we are not the same and did not have equal rights in the eyes of the law and society.”

Even their kids are now old enough to understand the value of their mothers being a legally married couple. It offers them a sense of security, she explains.

“There’s a sense of permanence with marriage and that we’re a family unit because we’re married,” Sylvia says. “I think they’re at an age when kids like to put things in categories and understand the world around them and they like being included in this marriage party.”

The pair belongs to a gay parents’ support group based in Long Beach that meets sporadically throughout the month. But the distance, especially with two preschool kids in tow, is becoming too much, so Sylvia is trying to build one in the South Bay.

“I know there’s quite a lot of families here,” she says. “We ask each other questions about how we got our kids, and it’s not satisfying a curiosity, it’s about having a shared experience. It’s not me explaining to someone, or holding someone’s hand.”

Less need?

Rivas, the Dolphin’s weekend bartender, says there are vastly more LGBT-identified individuals in the South Bay than commonly believed – those who aren’t plugged in either at the Dolphin Bar scene or the Center. “They’re either home bodies or go out to different areas,” he says.

Crystal, a 38-year-old single mother from Gardena, has lived in the South Bay through most of her adult life. After ending a short-lived marriage with a man, Crystal came out as a lesbian at age 25. Soft-spoken and reserved, she explains that almost all of her encounters and relationships began online, whether in chatrooms or meet up groups.

“If you’re gay around here you feel shy to see others so it’s hard to meet them here,” she says. “It’s just sad.”

Since escaping an abusive relationship a few years ago, she’s been attending weekly counseling at the LGBT Resource Center in Hollywood. She says it was just four months ago she learned the South Bay had its own resource center.

Dr. Jennifer Reed, an associate professor of women’s, gender and sexuality studies at Cal State University of Long Beach, believes the decreasing participation and visibility of South Bay’s LGBT community is part of a larger trend. She says that as LGBT rights progressively become accepted in mainstream society, “there’s a perceived, less need” for gay-specific gathering spaces, such as bars and community centers.

“As the politics change, we’re gonna have less and less concentrated community,” Reed says. “It’s not that those communities will go away – it’ll change and include edgier people.”

That would include Torrance resident Melissa Elizondo, who drives over to the Dolphin Bar almost every day. After discovering the bar about two years ago, she stopped trekking out to West Hollywood and has made a home out of it, volunteering her time to do marketing and promotions for the community.

“A lot of my friends happen to be gay,” Elizondo says. “It’s the freeness, the openness, the nonjudgmental perception of you do what you want, I do what I want. I made this my home. This is my little family here.”

One 25-year-old Redondo Beach woman, who requested anonymity, says while she acknowledges the larger trend toward acceptance and inclusivity, her hometown is “one of the slower areas to grasp it.” Just because outright discrimination toward the LGBT community is not as evident doesn’t mean there’s no room for further progress.

For instance, would any bars in the South Bay – other than the Dolphin, of course – want to host a ladies’ night once a week?

“I’m sure there’s tons of gay people who live in the South Bay – they just don’t have an area to go to, which makes it hard to meet people,” she says. “I’m dating someone right now, but even friend-wise, how do you meet people who are similar? Not that people are discriminatory, but it’s fun to hang out with other gays because you have a common ground.”

### One More Time

Back at the luau fundraiser at the Dolphin, the mood is picking up. By 6:30 p.m., the karaoke machine is on blast, and it’s as busy as a successful weekend night. The bar is lined with clusters of men and women drinking, the pool table surrounded with people sharing loud conversations.

Steve Bopp, donning rainbow leis around his neck and a silver wedding band on his ring finger, makes his way into the back room, where a collective waft of cigarette smoke hangs in the tepid air. He’s without his new husband Gilbert, who’s at another function in Gardena.

Bopp, who in 1994 ran for Redondo Beach City Council, wasn’t “out” at the time, he says. “Everyone else knew I was gay – I was the last one to know.” When he eventually did, he was greeted by support from his friends and, to his surprise, his parents. “I wanted them to know that I’m still Steve – it doesn’t change the guy, just because he’s gay, black, white, yellow, green...”

He met Gonzalez one night at the Dolphin Bar in 2005. Gonzalez, who was there with another friend, approached Bopp and said the first words to his future husband.

“He came out here and said, ‘You look like my uncle,’” Bopp recalls, laughing.

The two became friends, dating on and off for about six years until they began an official relationship last year. The couple now lives together in Bopp's house in Redondo Beach.

Since tying the knot last month, Bopp and Gonzales haven't stopped planning. On Sept. 22, the newlyweds will be holding a dream ceremony, this time with their family and friends, at the Palos Verdes botanical garden.

Gonzalez wants to ride down the aisle on a horse wearing a traditional Mexican cowboy outfit, so his husband is going to make that a reality.