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## Free Pride Hugs

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## *Don Unger*

### *Reflection*

“Free Pride Hugs” grapples with aging and the ephemeral, or maybe more accurately, the shifting nature of community, by reflecting on some of my experiences with the LGBTQ+ community in Albany, New York, in the late 1990s and early 2000s. For me, these issues coalesced during my participation in the World Pride and Reclaim Pride marches held in New York City in June 2019. The events commemorated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Stonewall Riots.

## **Free Pride Hugs**

**I**t had been 17 years since I last spoke with Steve. In life, moving forward had always meant leaving people behind. Before social media, it seemed natural, though lamentable, that when someone moved to another city, their life simply changed. You lost touch. Steve and I lost touch.

Steve and I were close friends when I lived in Albany, New York. I moved there when I was 18 to attend the State University of New York at Albany, but dropped out after becoming disenchanted with college and getting deeply involved in activism. Over the nine years that I lived there, I worked in about a dozen service industry jobs. I also promoted a couple different weekly parties at clubs, but that didn’t go anywhere. In 2002, I left Albany to go back to college.

Once I left, I didn’t return. Getting my bachelor’s degree led to more school, more degrees, and eventually a job in academia. It meant moving around the country for almost twenty years. Since leaving Albany, I’ve lived in Marathon, New York; Anchorage, Alaska; Lafayette, Indiana; Austin, Texas; Oxford, Mississippi; and now, Memphis, Tennessee. While I’ve had to leave folks that I love behind in each instance, I have done a better job maintaining some of those relationships than I did when I left Albany. Technology has helped. But every time I move, it feels more difficult to keep up with friends and to grow roots in a new place. Moving so often has also made me susceptible to nostalgia. Social media does not alleviate the psychological weight of lost connections and fading memories. It won’t let us go back. Still, it prompts us to *look* back, and it provides opportunities to reconnect with some of the people from our pasts.

\* \* \*

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Steve and I shared a couple different apartments in Albany. For a while, we worked together at a trendy wine bar and art gallery called Cafe Lulu on Lark Street. Lark Street sits in the middle of Albany’s Center Square

neighborhood. When we lived and worked in Center Square, it had dance clubs, music venues, record stores, bookstores, a “Gay and Lesbian Community Center,” a few quirky gift shops, and a slew of well-reputed bars and restaurants. Albany in general, and Center Square in particular, shaped my expectations for what a community should feel like.

In a community, you don’t need everyone to love you, but you need people to *see* you. It provides you with the sense that you belong there. Also, you need people who trust that you see them. Steve and I were part of this community. We could walk down Lark Street any time of the day and run into friends and acquaintances, and we’d share anecdotes about what we were doing, how work was going, and if we had seen so-and-so. The conversations weren’t always deep, but they pointed to the many connections we shared.

Both Steve and I are gay. In our 20s, queer bars played important roles in developing this sense of community. In the late 1990s, Center Square queers had a few choices for going out. If you were a gay guy and you wanted to hook up, you went to Water Works on Saturday nights, which we referred to as Wally World. You could dance there, but it had a tiny dance floor that was often overcrowded. In addition to Center Square residents, Wally World attracted older white men from the suburbs and rural areas outside of Albany. I never saw many women at Wally World, and the crowd was often very, very white. If you just wanted to hang out with a small group of friends, shoot pool, and listen to Mariah on the jukebox, then you went to Oh Bar, also known as Slow Bar. Oh Bar had regulars who held up the bar and dropped quarter after quarter into the tabletop game console at the far end of it, but I never went there unless I was meeting friends. If you went out during the week that meant going to Power Company, or PoCo, on Wednesdays. It was their 18+ night, so it drew the biggest crowds of any queer venue all week. It was also the most integrated night of the week in terms of race and gender identity; it had the best dancefloor; and the two-for-one drink special meant that a lot of straight folks would come out to drink with their queer friends.

Steve and I rarely missed a Wednesday night at PoCo. In fact, we elevated getting ready into a ritual. Sometimes, we’d go clothes shopping that afternoon. More often than not, Steve wanted a new shirt. He always chose something plaid or something shiny. That evening, we’d pregame with 40-ouncers and house music, often Junior Vasquez or Armand van Helden remixes of some pop diva. We’d bop around the apartment waiting for a Freeman’s mud or clay mask to dry. We’d talk about who we did or didn’t want to see or about something we’d heard recently about someone who would undoubtedly be at the club. We’d compete for space in front of the bathroom mirror where we plucked our eyebrows. (It’s beyond me how anyone’s eyebrows survived the ’90s.) Once we got ourselves together, we’d make the rounds, dropping into Lulu’s or Café Hollywood to have a drink and catch up with friends who worked or hung out there. In Albany, bars stayed open until 4 a.m. so we didn’t have to rush to get to the club. At around 12:30 a.m. we’d head to PoCo. The crowd peaked around that time.

At times, we'd try to be one another's wingman, but more often than not, we mingled separately, crossing paths and checking in with one another periodically. At the end of the night, we'd either make plans to get food before heading home, or Steve would let me know that he was hanging out with someone. While I made out with folks at the club, I almost never hooked up. AIDS made each of us determine where we drew the line.

In the '90s, Center Square might have been a queer mecca, but it wasn't exactly a playground. The threat of anti-queer violence also loomed in the back of our minds. I had been gay bashed in Center Square a couple times. Once a couple guys called me faggot, sucker punched me, and ran off while I waited for a couple slices of pizza at the joint down the street from PoCo. Another time, I was harassed in front of Lulu's. Some friends and I were standing out front smoking cigarettes when three white guys passing by tried to pick a fight with us. They started in on my friend Nina, but when they saw me, their focus turned.

"He. She. It. I don't know what the fuck you are." One of the men shouted at me, gesturing at my clothes. I wore a flowy skirt, a lace top, a leather jacket, and make up. It wasn't drag so much as androgynous, and it really pissed him off. I loved that and leaned into it, which just pissed him off more.

The noise prompted Susan, a middle-aged, butch lesbian who washed dishes at Lulu's, to come outside. She hurried my group of friends into the café and shut the door. The homophobes promptly smashed it. While we couldn't completely escape the threat of violence, the fact that someone stepped in meant that people in the community had seen us. A community can't always protect you, but it can defend you.

\* \* \*

Over the years, memories of life in Albany cohered into a sort of personal mythos. Periodically, I dug around social media platforms for profiles of folks who lived there back then. I needed to reminisce with someone about those times and add dimension to my memories. Finally, I found Steve's profile on Facebook in 2018. I looked for him a few other times over the years, but I didn't have any luck. After we friended one another, we messaged occasionally. At one point, Steve said, "If you are ever in NYC, we should meet and catch up." In June 2019, I traveled to NYC for the festivities honoring the Stonewall Riots' 50th anniversary. I also reconnected with Steve.

By the time I made it to NYC, Steve had moved to Hackensack, New Jersey, having been priced out of the city. He took the train into the city on the day of the Pride Parade, and I met him outside Penn Station. We grabbed lunch at the West Bank Café in Midtown where we talked about where we lived and worked now. Then, we made our way to the Village.

As we wandered down 7th Avenue, Steve asked, "Are you doing what you imagined you'd be doing?" I wasn't sure what he meant. He continued, "I always thought we would be dead by now. When I look back on things, I never expected us to reach our 40s."

I didn't say anything. I thought about his question. We partied quite a bit and there were sporadic acts of violence, but I never thought of life in Albany as particularly dangerous.

Steve mentioned Jimmy. He co-owned PoCo with his partner Al. "Remember, Jimmy was really sick. Then he started AZT, and he got better. But he looked so terrible afterward. It wrecked his body," Steve said. "He didn't come to the club much after that."

Steve was talking about AIDS. He didn't think we'd survive to reach our 40s, but he didn't mean just us. He meant himself, our friends, and all gay men of a particular vintage.

"I don't remember Jimmy. I only knew Al, but we weren't close," I said. "If you mean did I ever think I'd be a professor, then no. I didn't know what I would be doing when I left Albany. I just needed something."

The conversation shifted. Steve and I talked about how we never imagined marriage or having kids. "They weren't anything I have ever thought much about. They weren't something we did," I said. What you see shapes your possibilities. I didn't know any gay men who had kids. No one talked about marriage.

"No, they weren't."

The parade ended. Throngs of people milled about the streets trying to figure out what to do next. We walked single-file through the crowds, veering away from 7th Avenue below Christopher Street.

"Jell-O shots? You want to buy Jell-O shots?" A young, Black, female-presenting person carrying a small cooler walked up to us. They wore rainbow socks.

Steve shook his head. He had just taken a drag on a cigarette. He pushed the smoke out quickly and said, "No, thanks."

The young person kept walking, "Jell-O shots?"

We kept walking. Steve steered the conversation from how we saw ourselves then to how young people see themselves nowadays, "What do you think about the fact that so many of them don't identify as gay or straight or whatever? They just go with it. They don't question it or worry about it."

"Think about how much bullshit we went through for being gay. I still go through it in the South. We don't have any rights there. I can't relate to these kids at all," I replied as I weaved around people blocking the sidewalk.

"Yeah, they don't really care about all that." Steve continued, "I'm jealous of them."

As we made our way down 8th Avenue toward Washington Square Park, we began talking about old friends and acquaintances. Steve had family in Albany; even after he left, he kept connections to people there. He had stories, sometimes detailed and sometimes impressionistic, about what happened to them. We worked our way through a list of people we knew from past jobs, from going out, from the neighborhood. One of us would offer a name and brief description of the person. At times, we couldn't remember last names. We'd spend a moment or two describing our connection to the person.

"He worked at Justin's."

“Remember, he used to come into Margarita’s all the time.”

Occasionally, one or the other of us wouldn’t remember who the person was, so we dropped any conversation about them. These folks disappeared in the kind of rapid conversation that collapses 19 years into a few hours. Some died from drug overdoses or suicides. Some went to jail. Others developed serious illnesses. Some left Center Square or Albany altogether: they got married, moved to more remote areas of upstate New York, and had kids. Many of the gay men disappeared without a trace. We hadn’t heard what happened to them. We used to see them all the time. We were connected to them, but we weren’t necessarily close with all of them.

While we recounted these stories, I pictured the community that we had been a part of disintegrating. I have never recaptured that sense of community in the many places I’ve lived. I’ve come close, but then I had to move again for school and work. It’s difficult to understand when people disappear, whether through death, prison, or family. Where do they go? It’s part of growing older. I imagine how, for other people, I might be one of those old acquaintances who simply disappeared—the connection severed. Without that sense of community, I barely exist nowadays. Who *sees* me now?

The older I get, the more I become the old guy standing in the corner in a room full of young people watching the band but not interacting with anyone. I eat dinner alone at the bar. I show up alone to the concert. I am not sure if it’s just me or if there’s a whole generation of gay men who spend most of their leisure time alone. We didn’t die; we didn’t go to prison; we didn’t partner off, adopt some kids, or move to the suburbs. We weren’t the generation ravaged by AIDS—though we certainly experienced or witnessed some of that. We are the remnants of the next generation: a generation that learned how to be gay from one another and from the few films and books that broke through into public consciousness in the late ’80s and early ’90s. In the Albany bar scene in the ’90s, we didn’t have many elders around to tell us about what things used to be like or how they might be different. There were a few older queens. They stuck together or sat alone, often at the bar. I suppose we didn’t try to unearth their histories. At least, I didn’t. Why didn’t I see them?

“I don’t think most people understand our generation. They call us xennials—born at the tail end of generation x and the beginning of the millennials. We’re the smallest generation and the one most likely to die from a drug overdose,” Steve continued.

Steve and I were part of a much smaller group within that generation. We came out when we were teenagers in the early ’90s: long after Stonewall; but long before LGBTQ+ folks had many legal protections outside so-called queer meccas like Albany; long after folks established Albany’s Gay & Lesbian Community Center and Pride Parade, but before the highly publicized murders of Brandon Teena, Ali Forney, and Matthew Sheppard. We came out after *And the Band Played On* but before *Queer as Folk*. The LGBTQ+ rights movement shifted among struggles for basic rights and representation and struggles for liberation. Later, those struggles turned toward survival. But by the ’90s, part of this movement became the “gay community” as I knew it, marked by death but focused on living openly and without apology. My sense of this

community disintegrated when I left Albany. In the years that followed, a segment of the movement regrouped around “gays in the military” and marriage equality—two issues I never thought about in my day-to-day life.

As we entered Washington Square Park, we passed throngs of young people enjoying Pride, ostensibly celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. Our conversation separated us from the revelry. I continued, “We’re sort of our own thing, xennial gay men but queers in general. How many older gay men did you know when you were their age? How many went out to the bars? Too many young people take for granted that LGBTQ+ people are ubiquitous—that there are generations before them and that there will be generations after them. I didn’t feel like that when I was in my twenties. I didn’t feel like we were everywhere or always. I didn’t feel like I could do whatever I wanted.”

“You did whatever you wanted, for the most part,” Steve countered.

“I guess so. It’s just different now.” I looked around the park, staring at two masculine-presenting youths sitting on a park bench. One of them was holding up a hastily painted sign that read “Free Pride Hugs.”

Steve lit a new cigarette off his previous one. “It is.”

### *Author Bio*

Don Unger is an assistant professor in the Department of Writing & Rhetoric and affiliate faculty in Women and Gender Studies and in the Community Engaged Leadership program at the University of Mississippi. Additionally, he serves as part of the *Spark* Editorial Collective. He lives in Memphis, Tennessee.