



Spencer Pride volunteers show off their pride at a volunteer appreciation event after the 2017 Spencer Pride Festival. Credit: Spencer Pride.

Projecting a Rural Rainbow

How Spencer Pride helped transform its rural Hoosier community

By Jonathan A. Balash

Spencer, Indiana - located in a red county in a red state, on the cusp of the Bible Belt - has a population of under 3,000 people. Historically, the town has not been known as a welcoming place for minorities. As recently as the mid-1980s, Ku Klux Klan members could be seen collecting donations at downtown intersections. Yet, for the past decade, Spencer Pride has been operating and thriving in this conservative community. We have accomplished this through a strategic approach within the community and among our dedicated volunteers. We recognize that we live in a place where it seems that everyone knows everything about each other, yet are often very indirect in the way they communicate concerns. This is not a place where picketing and riots are effective. These methods are seen as foreign intrusions into the local way of life. Spencer Pride, therefore, has to employ alternative methods to provoke progress. We build relationships, educate, and work through our differences by engaging with one another in a respectful manner. On the outside, this could look

like a very passive form of resistance. In reality, it's the most effective way to cultivate real change in our community.

A Brief History of Spencer Pride

Spencer Pride began as an offshoot of the local PFLAG chapter. We held our first Pride festival in 2007, to increase public engagement with issues relevant to the LGBTQ+ community. While there was low attendance at the first event (72 people, to be exact), we considered it a success. The following year, the Festival was relocated to the lawn of the county courthouse. Over the years, the event has grown into a full-fledged summer festival and the second most attended event in downtown Spencer. Over the past two years, however, we have become much more widely known for establishing the Spencer Pride community center. The September 2016 opening of the Center made Spencer, Indiana the smallest community in the United States with a dedicated LGBTQ+ center.

Engaging the Community


In a small town like Spencer, influence is gained not by the number of Twitter followers one has, but by the number of relationships built. Relationships take time, yet are an investment well worth making. It is a lot harder to be perceived as “those people” when our volunteers are clearly visible in the community as neighbors, coworkers, participants in civic organizations, and members of families.

Some of our relationships have been built organically. Others were established in a more strategic fashion: For example, whenever new organizations emerge in our community, we intentionally infuse them with Spencer Pride volunteers. This gives us both direct insight into what is happening in the community, and greater influence on what is going on. This is important in a small, conservative town where individuals are not outspoken and public with their concerns. If we did not have volunteer presence within these organizations with an “ear to the ground,” we would be unaware of brewing concerns or opportunities to improve Spencer Pride’s reputation or work within the community.

When problems arise, our volunteers engage directly to work through concerns and forge a path together. When county commissioners complained about how we had removed gender distinctions from the restrooms at our 2017 Festival, we raced to the commissioners’ meeting to speak with officials before the meeting ended. We spoke to the commissioners about the need to have comfortable, safe restrooms for our attendees, specifically those who identify as transgender and non-binary. We also reminded them about the positive influence that Spencer Pride has had on the town, both in establishing a welcoming reputation as well as in the economic impact of our events. The original concern was addressed and the commissioners formally granted us permission to un-gender the restrooms at the following year’s event, as well.

A few years ago, elders from a local church which had participated in the Festival raised concerns about elements of our event that they felt were controversial. The drag show and presence of a leather vendor in our marketplace were a few of the items that had raised eyebrows among their leadership. Consequently, the church decided not to participate as a vendor again. This would have meant the loss of a local faith-based organization in our Festival marketplace. Since local participation in our events helps bring legitimacy to our work, we could not let the church slip away. Once the issues were raised, our volunteers met with church elders within days to talk through them. While they did not always understand our reasoning, they came to respect that we were very conscientious in how we were managing the event, ensuring that it was family-friendly. We pointed out that it was important that they attend to ensure they were there for the people who needed them. Although I am an atheist, which I confessed to them, I wanted them to understand the importance of having welcoming faith communities present at the Festival. We were not only able to convince the church to return as a vendor, but they also decided to become a sponsor.

These examples reflect a common situation for Spencer Pride: A problem arises, our passionate volunteers engage directly to address it, and the outcome is more than just resolution of the original problem; it ends up being turned into an *advantage* for the organization. When the problem stems from a concern raised by an individual or group, we reach out to better understand the basis of that



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The Spencer Pride Festival has grown significantly over the years. The festival encompasses all four sides of the courthouse lawn and two blocks of the street.
Credit: Spencer Pride.

concern. We feel that in order for others to respect us and be willing to hear our position, we need to first understand theirs. This has proven effective over the years.

Improving the Community

Spencer Pride’s mission is to make Indiana a more welcoming place for all people. While we focus on issues pertinent to the LGBTQ+ community, our strategic goals are broader, including investing in improvements within our local community. By making our town and county better, they become a more appealing place to visit and live, thereby injecting the community with open-minded individuals who will also benefit our local economy.

Our Pride sponsors local events, donates items for local silent auctions and raffles, makes financial contributions to other organizations, and dispatches our own volunteers to support a variety of other groups. This support, whether through financial sponsorship or donation of volunteer time, makes Spencer Pride an asset to the community at large. This helps to ensure the longevity and influence of our own LGBTQ+ focused work and mission.

The most significant single investment within the community has been the purchase and transformation of a large, historic building for the Spencer Pride commUnity center. The commUnity center is one of the largest structures in the heart of Spencer, encompassing nearly 10,000 square feet directly on the courthouse square. This dramatic downtown presence has significantly increased visibility of our work. It has also given us the ability to offer even more direct services to the community.

Building a Community within Spencer Pride

Spencer Pride is 100-percent volunteer-fueled and has recently experienced a five-fold increase in our volunteers due to increased visibility brought on by the purchase of the commUnity center, alongside a decade’s worth of notable local events.

Spencer Pride has a rather unique strategy to keep our volunteers engaged. We recognize that volunteers who choose to spend their time with us do so because they want to make the world a better place, not necessarily because they only care about LGBTQ+ issues. We encourage our volunteers to support other organizations and we coordinate regular volunteer activities for other groups. It is this open relationship with our volunteers that gives the organization its heart.

Taking Thoughtful Risks

Operating in a small, conservative area does not make our organization less vocal in pursuit of our mission. Spencer Pride volunteers do not avoid controversy, but we do not intentionally seek it, either.

Last year, the windows of the commUnity center featured apparel from the Condom Fashion Show, a fundraiser at Indiana University Bloomington. The outfits were made entirely of condoms and were prominently displayed. The presence of so many tools of family planning in a community, whose public schools are permitted to teach abstinence only, evoked strong emotions among some local citizens. We spoke with many of the individuals with concerns, most of which were centered around the idea that talking about safer sexual practices was not our mission or that such things should not be so publicly displayed. We explained how the HIV epidemic in the 1980s was made worse be-

cause many people did not want to acknowledge it. As a result, the crisis raged out of control. We will not be silent in regard to the health and safety of people in our community, regardless of how they identify. Ignoring safer sexual practices would be doing just that. We maintained the displays regardless of the concerns. The latex creations had inspired many productive conversations at the Center about how to improve education about STI prevention. For us, the displays had served an important purpose.

Another example of Spencer Pride’s “spine” can be seen at our annual Pride Festival, where a now-famous drag show concludes the

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Bloomington BEAT, a youth-based performing arts group, performs at the 2016 Spencer Pride Festival. Credit: Spencer Pride.

family-focused event. We recognized early on that, while drag does not represent the entire LGBTQ+ community, it is still *a part* of the community and its history. Excluding drag from the event would, therefore, not be an honest representation of the LGBTQ+ community. We did not want to hide in a proverbial closet. Instead, we chose to promote the show prominently. We have also provided education to the community about the important role that drag has played in LGBTQ+ history. Festival attendees, many of whom had never seen a drag queen before, have welcomed the drag show year after year.

Individuals who have had the opportunity to see Spencer Pride at work know just how strategic – but bold – we are in pursuit of our mission.

Our Results

Through direct engagement, investment, and a worthy mission, Spencer Pride has earned the respect of our community and has made a profound impact over the past decade.

The notable building that houses the Spencer Pride community center had most recently been home to a notoriously anti-LGBTQ+ church. What had been a place that promoted hate and intolerance of our people now welcomes *all people* to step into its doors, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The small Hoosier town of Spencer, much like its LGBTQ+ center now under renovation, has begun a great transformation. Spencer Pride's volunteers are a big part of that change and we plan to continue our work until our mission is complete. We will keep talking with our detractors and those who do not yet understand our value within the community. We will continue to educate them and to learn from them so that we can, together, cultivate a community of compassion and understanding for all people. ●



Jonathan Balash (he/him/his) is one of the founders of Spencer Pride, Inc., and currently serves as its President. Jonathan was born and raised in Indiana. He graduated from Indiana University Bloomington with a bachelor's degree in Biology and currently works as a manager for Catalent Biologics. Jonathan lives in Spencer with his husband, Jacob, and their five-year-old son, Truman.

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