



Rainbow Family Guide



Standing Together

FAMILIES ALWAYS HAVE A HOME AT PFLAG

Deborah Bostock-Kelley

PPFLAG was born 50 years ago from a mother's love of her LGBTQ+ son. Marching alongside him, she carried a sign in a Pride parade that read "Parents of Gays: Unite in Support for Our Children."

After she was approached by other participants who said they wished their parents supported them like she supported her son, Jeanne Manfred and her family created PFLAG, originally Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. It has grown into the largest LGBTQ+-affirming organization of its kind in the U.S.

Today it works to educate, support and advocate for LGBTQ+ people and those who love them. It has more than 325,000 supporters and hundreds of chapters, many in Florida. That includes PFLAG Riverview, Safety Harbor and Greater Orlando.

Faith Moeller started the Riverview chapter in 2020. She was on an Evangelical church staff when her child came out to her. She stepped down and began to read books about holding on to your faith and loving your child.

Moeller and her then-14-year-old child discovered PFLAG Tampa in the process, which has served the region for more than a decade. After a year of other Christian community members asking her for advice when their children came out, she started a book club, then the PFLAG chapter, as Riverview had no LGBTQ+-affirming churches.

"It's been wonderful to have this group because we have LGBTQ+ folks of all ages and different ends of the spectrum," Moeller explains. "Grandparents, parents, allies and partners from other LGBTQ+ organizations come to our monthly support meetings and hear each other's stories."

"We have a parent crying because their kid came out, and then we have another parent in the circle that is marching in the next Pride parade," she continues. "I just think it's beautiful that we listen to one another and grow."

PFLAG Riverview partners with LGBTQ+ and LGBTQ+-affirming therapists to provide mental health resources for its members, in part because of the political climate in Florida. The state has enacted a growing number of anti-LGBTQ+ laws and policies in recent years.



PHOTO COURTESY PFLAG GREATER ORLANDO

"As these bills go into effect, especially living in Florida, the need will be greater for support. The laws are so hurtful," she says, noting it makes PFLAG's work even more important.

"PFLAG's mission is to offer support and education and for us to learn to advocate for ourselves," Moeller advises. "Attend a meeting and share about PFLAG, so when you do hear a parent talk about a child who's come out and struggling, you can say, 'Check out PFLAG Riverview; everyone is accepted there.'"

PFLAG Safety Harbor opened in Feb. 2023. President and Founder Wendy Vernon's youngest child came out to her at 11. "We were accepting, but I looked for support and couldn't find any nearby," she remembers. "I decided that if there was nothing here, I needed to do it.

"I got my dream team board together," she continues. "I knew it was something I was driven and meant to do. We hit the ground running, hoping to reach more people. We are here and ready."

Like Riverview, PFLAG Safety Harbor offers meetings and social events. Vernon says the latter "are two-fold — to have fun together and provide a community, and indirectly to provide support." She hopes the chapter's efforts encourage other allies to step up.

"Ally is an action word. It's not a title that you just take," she says. "It's something that you do. Speak out. Allies can correct people and

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educate them when they speak in a hateful or offensive manner toward our LGBTQ+ community. Allies can show up and join our meetings and our socials. There's power in numbers."

Donations are welcome at all PFLAGs, including Safety Harbor. It helps reach more people and fund opportunities to provide other services.

"We are here to keep everyone moving forward in these times, provide community and support, and build relationships with community partners to find more safe spaces," Vernon explains. PFLAG Safety Harbor does that by interacting with as many individuals and organizations as possible, even those in opposition to their efforts.

"Even if they disagree, they still need to hear it," Vernon notes. "PFLAG's motto is we lead with love. We use these moments to teach, support and advocate."

PFLAG Greater Orlando has done that since 1992. President Jerry Collins and Board Members at Large, Tom and Ann Grimes, are three of eight volunteers at its helm.

As in all PFLAGs, members help one another in confidential peer-to-peer support groups. They share their stories and experiences, something Collins understands firsthand.

After being outed to his parents at 19, he was sent to a counselor who told him nothing was wrong with him. That therapist introduced him to PFLAG.

"In my first PFLAG meeting, I was very nervous. Thankfully they saved me towards

the end," he remembers. "My voice was quivering. I told my story. Almost everyone hugged me ... that was the first time I experienced or even expected that other parents accepted their kids."

Ann Grimes says that Collins' story is sadly not unique. Many people lose family members when they or their child comes out. PFLAG helps them find acceptance.

"When first coming to a meeting, people are usually in distress," Collins notes. "The person always feels alone because they have not yet talked to friends or family, or if they're lucky, they had friends, family or a counselor bring them to us. When they are in our meeting for the first time, we try to let them listen and hold their story until the end.

"What usually happens is they finally feel like they are no longer alone," he continues. "They hear some of the same stories they are experiencing, opening the door for them to be welcomed and feel supported."

"Our meetings are open to anybody in the LGBTQ+ community, allies and family members," Ann Grimes adds. "They're open to anybody who would like to attend and get information, discuss issues they are having or just looking for some help in this [environment] where everything seems to fall against the LGBTQ+ community."

She says that about 70% of families who attend involve a trans family member who's coming out, some of whom previously came out as lesbian, gay or bisexual. They call it a "second coming-out process."

"It is a major railroad for those families. They don't know what to do," she says. "They are scared, especially with the climate right now. Older members or parents who

are comfortable with their kids are coming to us because they don't know what to do with all the hate. It's new ground for us."

PFLAG Greater Orlando has partnered with organizations like Equality Florida for that reason. Collins says the organizations are "a big circle of friends and family."

"We made great strides in the state with gay marriage, gender-affirming care, then suddenly we're back in the 50s again," Tom Grimes says. "We're relying on Equality Florida to do the legal fight and we'll continue our advocacy and education that we have available here in the Central Florida area."

The three say that other PFLAG chapters and the flagship nonprofit provide seminars and information to help them stay informed, allowing them to help others. They agree that allies can help by volunteering and speaking to school board members, principals and senators.

"We are always looking for volunteers, members and corporate sponsors," Tom Grimes notes. "If you want to help our organization as an ally, even if you don't have anyone LGBTQ+ people close to you or in your family, everyone can help us. If you want to help our cause and spread the word, you can be part of our family."

"Family isn't always blood; it's who you surround yourself with," Ann Grimes adds. "You always have a home at PFLAG."

Learn more about PFLAG and its chapters throughout Central Florida and Tampa Bay on page 29. 🌈



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