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ONE HUG AT A TIME

**FREE MOM HUGS FLORIDA
EMBRACES EVERYONE**

**Orlando VA continues to offer
gender-affirming care**

**St. Pete restaurant Zoie's
permanently closes**

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PHOTO BY DYLAN TODD

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There is literally a chapter of Free Mom Hugs in every state. Not only will you find resources to support your child, but you will also find resources to support you with the joy and the friendships you find, I call it my #RainbowNetwork.”

- LAURA CAMPBELL, CHAPTER LEADER OF FREE MOM HUGS FLORIDA



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FREE HUGS
FREE MOM HUGS

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FREE MOM HUGS
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ONE HUG AT A TIME

FREE MOM HUGS FLORIDA EMBRACES EVERYONE

Deborah Bostock-Kelley

BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER Pride month, colorful T-shirts are seen throughout Central Florida and Tampa Bay with a simple message. They often feature a small rainbow bear nestled within a more prominent one with just three words: “Free Mom Hugs.”

They serve as a declaration that the wearer is a safe person for members of the LGBTQ+ community, a source of love and acceptance. It all began in Oklahoma in 2014.

Free Mom Hugs was founded by Sara Cunningham, a Christian mother in the state who spent years denying her son’s sexuality after he came out to her, torn

between her love for him and what her religion preached. When she finally became involved with the LGBTQ+ community, she was devastated to see that the rejection and hurt she had caused her son was neither a unique nor isolated experience within it.

During the 2015 Oklahoma City Pride Festival, Cunningham fashioned a homemade button

with the words “Free Mom Hugs.” Little did she know that this simple act would unleash an overwhelming response from the LGBTQ+ community, igniting a nationwide movement of love, visibility and acceptance.

In 2018, she was propelled into the national spotlight after her Facebook post offering to be a stand-in mom at any same-sex wedding went viral. “Call me,” the post read, “I’ll be your biggest fan. I’ll even bring bubbles.”

This outpouring of love and support led to the establishment of Free Mom Hugs as a national nonprofit organization, with chapters spanning all states and reaching global initiatives. Its impact has been particularly

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FREE ACROSS FLORIDA: (L-R) Mothers and more showcase their support for the LGBTQ+ community at Pride events in Polk County, Sarasota and Sebring by offering Free Mom Hugs across the state. The nonprofit's Florida chapter has five regional groups and nearly 1,000 registered volunteers. PHOTOS BY RYAN WILLIAMS-JENT AND JEREMY WILLIAMS

►► | **Free Mom Hugs**
FROM PG.23

profound in Florida, where the movement has flourished — providing solace and support to members of the LGBTQ+ community who often find themselves as political pawns, marginalized or abandoned by their families.

The Florida chapter has taken root and blossomed in the face of division. Free Mom Hugs Florida is comprised of compassionate volunteers who dedicate their time and effort to spreading love and support to the LGBTQ+ community.

Their mission is simple yet sincere: to offer warm, heartfelt hugs, understanding and encouragement to those who may have been rejected due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. It's a testament to a mother's love and the belief that every person deserves acceptance. It set in motion a grassroots revolution, spreading its message of unconditional love, one hug at a time.

Leading the charge in Florida is Laura Campbell, the local leader of Free Mom Hugs who's based in Orlando. In 2018, when her child came out as transgender, Campbell sought support from a social media group called Serendipitydodah, "Home of the Mama Bears," to learn how to educate herself and best support her daughter.

Auspiciously, Campbell discovered Cunningham was

also a member of that group. It was within that supportive community that Free Mom Hugs Florida was born.

"When they expanded Free Mom Hugs out of Oklahoma and allowed it in other states, I got involved with it," Campbell reflects. With passion and determination, she became the chapter leader of Free Mom Hugs Florida in October 2022, fueling her deep desire to make a difference for kids like her daughter.

Campbell is dedicated to recruiting more like-minded moms to join the ranks of the group. Free Mom Hugs Florida's Facebook page now has 11,000 followers and features five regional groups across the state to help connect with nearly 1,000 registered volunteers at local events, open to anyone who is LGBTQ+ or an ally.

During Pride events in Florida, Free Mom Huggers like Campbell proudly wear their "Free Mom Hugs" T-shirts, standing out amidst the kaleidoscope of rainbow outfits, shimmering sparkle and cascading glitter. Their presence alone speaks volumes, extending an open invitation to anyone needing reassurance or a comforting embrace. Walking through the crowd, they create a safe space for love and acceptance.

"Please join. There is literally a chapter of Free Mom Hugs in every state. Not only will you find resources to support your child, but you will also find resources to support you," she says. "With the joy and the friendships you find,

I call it my #RainbowNetwork. This group has a bond. Friendships have formed. It's like having a family."

But Free Mom Hugs Florida is not just about hugs; it's a community built on understanding, acceptance and learning. It is filled with ally moms, moms with family or friends in the LGBTQ+ community and community members themselves.

It also provides a safe haven for moms who have had to deconstruct their beliefs and find support in the most tolerant place. In a world where hate and discrimination are all too common, they share, this group offers nothing but love, open arms and a willingness to educate and learn together.

"For a lot of people who have to deconstruct from religion, it's finding that other base, that support in the most nonjudgmental place," Campbell explains. "These people are literally having the worst things thrown at them — hatred and vile things. This group has nothing but love to pour out to you.

"When you come into the community, you feel love. It's a community that will fully embrace you and embrace that you are learning too," she continues. "We know people make mistakes, but as long as you're working on the path of understanding and learning, we're nonjudgmental. You learn and get educated every day. It's about being open and receptive."

When asked what she would say to parents who deny or

disown their children when they come out as LGBTQ+, Campbell doesn't hesitate.

"This is your child. When you were pregnant, the only thing you ever asked for was a happy, healthy child," she responds. "When they say, 'I was taught in church that this is wrong,' I say, 'you know what, that's fine; I'll love your child. There's a whole army of Mama Bears out there that love your child and will be there for your child. I hope that you find grace in your heart to come back to your child.'

"I want the parent to understand that they are missing out on the beautiful soul of this person," she adds. "To fill their heart with hate — I just don't understand that logic. You need to decide that your child being happy, healthy and *alive* is a lot more important than you going and visiting a grave."

In some cases, the members of Free Moms Hugs can get the parent to change their perspective when they meet other accepting parents, especially those of transgender families.

"Some of the most beautiful people I know are transgender," Campbell notes. "Their hearts are as big as the world. To watch them fighting for basic human dignity and for them to still smile, I'm learning so much. It fuels my soul to want to make the world a better place for them."

Free Mom Hug members are particularly present for the LGBTQ+ community during Pride events, seen this and every year at Central Florida and Tampa Bay staples like Tampa Pride, St Pete

Pride, Polk Pride, Come Out with Pride, Sarasota Pride and more. They walk in parades, give out hugs from booths and walk around to offer "free range hugging."

"As we're walking, we give hugs to people," Campbell says. "We have pocket hugs that we hand out that people can take with them, so they have a reminder all the time that they are loved."

Becky Mallison attended her first Pride event in Tampa in March. Inspired by the love and kindness of Free Mom Hugs, soon after, she became the Polk County area coordinator and a crocheter of Free Mom Hugs' Pocket Hugs, a crocheted heart with a beaded bear inside. They're small enough to travel in a pocket as a reminder the owner is loved.

"It was so amazing to get out there as a straight ally and support everyone being their authentic self," Mallison says. "We let them know plenty of people support and celebrate them for who they are. Taking the Pocket Hugs to the events is really special."

Mallison believes it is crucial for every mom, regardless of their child's sexual orientation or gender identity, to volunteer with Free Mom Hugs. Her reason lies in the transformative power of empathy and compassion. Every child — gay or straight, cisgender or transgender — deserves unwavering support and acceptance from their parents. Unfortunately, when they are

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refused this vital affirmation, it leads to feelings of isolation, rejection and sometimes even suicidal ideation.

When a mom volunteers with Free Mom Hugs, she joins a network of mothers who understand the importance of embracing and uplifting all children, the group notes. These moms learn, grow and become change agents through their involvement, promoting love and acceptance within their families and communities. They become beacons of hope, challenging societal norms and fostering environments where every child can thrive.

Volunteering with Free Mom Hugs also provides an opportunity for personal growth and self-discovery. It allows moms to challenge any preconceived notions they may have had about the LGBTQ+ community, replacing ignorance with understanding and fear with love.

"Everyone I've met through Free Mom Hugs has been a truly amazing person, so kind, so loving, who really just wants to get out there and support the community as much as possible," Mallison explains. "I've met moms with children in the community. My children are not, but my sister is, and she's always been accepted. I realize not everyone is. There's a lot of work to do."

Doing that work with Free Mom Hugs Florida is the perfect fit, Mallison adds. She believes others will agree.

"I felt a connection with Free Mom Hugs," she says. "This is a great organization, and I'd like to encourage other moms who don't have a child in the community to come out and support those that do, because all moms should have a deep desire to protect all children."

Mallison experienced that firsthand at a recent Polk Pride event, where her Pocket Hugs were a massive hit.

"It's the young adults that we impacted most," she notes. "I got to hug three young women who were touched that we had the Pocket Hugs; one started to cry happy tears. I told her I made them and I was so happy that she liked them so much. I teared up and asked if she would like a hug. I got to hug her

and her two friends; we all were pretty emotional."

It's a common occurrence. Angela Martindale discovered Free Mom Hugs on Facebook when she sought support for her marriage. The group became a lifeline for her, offering acceptance and understanding when her own family did not. Free Mom Hugs Florida became a safe space where she could freely be herself, surrounded by people who celebrated her for who she was.

"I didn't have a whole lot of family that supported me and my wife," Martindale says. "My grandparents adopted me at a young age; they were old-school, 'you're going to be with a man, get married and have kids. We live this life, and this is how you will live your life. It's not going to be any other way.' I had no support. I literally went through hell because I couldn't live my life. I had to live the life they wanted."

Martindale posted in the Free Mom Hugs group and instantly received a warm response.

"They're very supportive of the community and people that don't have family," she says. "In this group, you can be free, and it's okay to be who you are."

Mindy "Mama" Cain agrees. She multitasks as a Free Mom Hugger and PFLAG Safety Harbor volunteer, in addition to serving

“Unfortunately, some parents are too selfish to see past the black and white to see the rainbows and the colorful things they are missing. The LGBTQ+ community is a beautiful gift to the world that too many people are missing out on.”

— FREE MOM HUGGER JENNIFER MARA CAVALIERE

as vice president of Countryside High School's theatre group and booster club.

"I give away Free Mom Hugs because I think you should have them," she explains, "even if it's not your biological mom. I send out good vibes and free hugs. It's wonderful. I have kids that aren't even mine."

Free Mom Hugs Florida has become an indispensable asset to the LGBTQ+ community with these warm embraces, accompanied by the phrase, "I'm your mom, now." By organizing support groups, hosting events and partnering with likeminded organizations throughout Central



WARM WELCOME: Free Mom Hugs Florida table at St Pete Pride 2023. PHOTO BY DYLAN TODD

Florida and Tampa Bay, they have been instrumental in creating safe spaces where the LGBTQ+ community can feel seen, valued and celebrated.

Their immeasurable impact extends far beyond these special events. These moms work to be catalysts for change, breaking down barriers and advocating

"We had a lot of LGBTQ+ actors and actresses that came through our doors that were shunned by their families. They had no place to go," she says. "They found refuge in theater; we made them part of our family, no questions asked. Hugs. Kisses. Family dinners. We included them in holidays. We did anything we

because of his family's love and support for the actors.

"He felt comfortable in his skin. It's such a beautiful thing to be able to see your child be who they are," she says. "You just love them. They're yours. How do you turn your back on such a beautiful gift?"

"Unfortunately, some parents are too selfish to see past the black and white to see the rainbows and the colorful things they are missing," she continues. "They're missing out on the kindest, biggest-hearted, loving, nonjudgmental people there are. The LGBTQ+ community is a beautiful gift to the world that too many people are missing out on."

Through a band of women wanting to make a difference, Free Mom Hugs Florida has become a positive force throughout the state. This grassroots movement reminds everyone that the LGBTQ+ community deserves to be embraced for who they are, a testament to the enduring power of compassion and the profound impact that a listening ear, a kind affirming word and a simple hug can have on someone's life. ♥

For more information about Free Mom Hugs and its Florida chapter, visit FreeMomHugs.org and [Facebook.com/FreeMomHugsFlorida](https://www.facebook.com/FreeMomHugsFlorida).

could make their time with us feel like family — like they could come to us for anything."

One of Cavaliere's favorite experiences involves a conversation with a timid young actor from out of state who had been disowned for being gay.

"He said I don't have any family, so I gave him the biggest hug and said 'I'm your family now,'" she remembers. "You are part of my family, so I will treat you like my kid. You answer to me. I'm your mom now. Keep in touch." We accept him for exactly who he is, no questions asked."

Cavaliere believes her biological son felt comfortable coming out to her as a teen