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Mission
*OUTMemphis empowers,
connects, educates, and
advocates for the LGBTQ
community of the
Mid-South.*

FEIN 62-1398741

Memphis LGBTQ Community:

On February 9, 2018, as Executive Director of OUTMemphis, I notified the OUTMemphis Board of Directors that we were suspending the Men's Potluck group's meeting at the Center until further notice. In my communication with the group, I left open the possibility of the group's return with a revamp of the structure, including making sure that every participant understands the rules of behavior in this safe space. The group was not banned permanently, nor were any of the individuals who are part of the group banned from the Center.

The Men's Potluck has been meeting at the Center for nearly 29 years, almost as long as the Center's existence. The Men's Potluck has been a source of great comfort for many men looking for peers with whom they could connect and socialize. It has served as a touch-point for men of a certain age who may have come out later in life, or who did not have a wide social circle of LGBT friends. That service is absolutely part of our Mission. **Moreover, The Men's Potluck has many fine men who attend.** Many of these men support OUTMemphis' work and vision, and have made numerous contributions across the years. Those men and their contributions are absolutely valued.

Unfortunately, the group has also been the focus of many complaints by volunteers, visitors, and staff who have felt disrespected, demeaned, and unwelcome.

A few examples, all corroborated:

- A 19 year old, experiencing homelessness and in our Metamorphosis program, attended one of the potlucks because he wanted to connect with other people. When he mentioned that he liked to take walks through Overton Park, one of the attendees said he must be turning tricks if he was in the park. When the young man responded that he would never do that, the attendee countered that it would be a good way for him to make money. The young man told staff that he would never return to the group, and felt uncomfortable in the Center.
- One night, a ceiling fan in the main meeting hall was not working. One of the attendees said that they should get the young African American staff member by saying "get the black boy to fix it."
- Last week, one of the regular potluck attendees was in the building. He was one of the men repeatedly asking staff and Board members when the potluck would return. He overheard a staff member and a volunteer speaking Spanish. He commented that they should stop, and that it wasn't fair for them to speak Spanish since no one else could understand. One of our interns, a young African American college student, asked to speak to him alone to explain why the comment was offensive. That man's response was to berate the young man, telling him that he was "nothing" and a "nobody," and to repeatedly call him "boy" and "a little boy." Even after two staff members intervened, the man continued to call our intern a "boy" and saying he had no right to correct him.

The OUTMemphis Board of Directors, and I, as Executive Director, will not tolerate these types of attacks and unwanted sexual advances on anyone in our space.

On July 11, 2017, I contacted the point of contact of the Men's Potluck and requested that we meet. At that meeting, we discussed the complaints that were being made, with specific examples, and I asked that he address the issues with the larger group, just as we do with each peer-led group that meets at the Center. We had several follow-up conversations to ensure the information was getting to the group. Over the course of several months, I continued to receive complaints that members of the group were continuing to make sexually and racially inappropriate comments to staff, volunteers, visitors, and participants and that the group's leadership was not intervening. I made the decision to suspend the group's meeting at the Center. The safety and well-being of the staff, volunteers, and visitors took priority over the inconvenience of the potluck not meeting.

After the potluck was suspended, the Board of Directors began to receive complaints from some in the group accusing the staff of age discrimination against the group. At this point, the Board of Directors organized a "listening session" where attendees presented their claim of discrimination against the staff, and especially me as the Executive Director. After completing their review, the Board found no evidence of age discrimination and reminded the group that all programming decisions are made by staff.

Our primary focus as an organization has ALWAYS been to provide a safe space to the LGBTQ community. As the demographics of our visitors, staff, board, and volunteers have grown, the expectations of behavior have changed as well. What may have been "acceptable" in a group of white men, has no place in the OUTMemphis of the present. We are a diverse community and we WILL respect the differences that we hold.

We are a sex-positive organization. It has always been a given that the men's potluck conversation might have an adult focus. Providing a safe space for us to talk about our intimate lives where it isn't taboo or illegal is important. We have never asked that that conversation be curtailed. Conversation like that, though, is different than sexually aggressive questioning of our staff and volunteers. Our staff deserve a space free of that kind of harassment. They also deserve a work space free of racial innuendo and outright racist comments.

OUTMemphis is committed to serving all parts of our community, including seniors. Since 2015, we have had a Senior Services committee that plans events, offers outreach, and advocates for LGBTQ seniors all over the region. We host several events each month. At the beginning of the year, we actually received a grant to create Senior LGBT Awareness Week, which turned into an entire month - this month. One of the unfortunate repercussions of the group's baseless claim of age discrimination is that the conflict has overshadowed events that the Senior Services committee worked hard to plan.

As a community, we are all aware of the mounting levels of hate in our world. Incidents of racial intolerance are more documented than ever. One suggestion made at the listening session with the Board was that we should train our staff better to respond to racist or sexually inappropriate comments made to them or about them. The statement, coming from a nearly all-white group of men, ignored the very real power disparity that exists in our society.

Again, I will stress that there are fine men who attended the potluck. I am sorry that they have been caught up in this. But I believe that those people in MY demographic....white, male, gay "men of a certain age" have an even greater responsibility to provide safe spaces for others, especially those who have been traditionally excluded from the privilege we enjoy.

We remain open to a group to serve the needs of men, especially senior men. For it to continue in the OUTMemphis space, it must reflect the values, safety, and diversity of our community.

Will Batts, Executive Director
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