

People & Families

NEW JERSEY COUNCIL ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

WINTER 2018

Ray Truitt, founding
member of Arc Mercer's
Special Needs Alliance
for Pride (SNAP) program

taking pride! **Support and Integration for LGBTQ Adults with Disabilities**



Trenton's LGBT Community meet up to mingle at local lounge Trenton Social. Arc Mercer's SNAP program seeks to include LGBTQ individuals with disabilities in numerous events and outings such as this.

Taking Pride!

Support and Integration for LGBTQ Adults with Disabilities

By Brenda Considine

It is a Thursday evening at Trenton Social,

a hip gathering place a few blocks from the capitol building in Trenton. The lounge is buzzing with conversations competing with a DJ spinning music in the corner. Abstract paintings by local artists hang on the exposed brick walls. In another room, artists, community leaders, politicians, lobbyists, and state workers—including a mom with three young children—chat in small groups. Most sit at tables enjoying a light meal while some flop down on well-worn overstuffed leather couches.

There, Ray Truitt and a group of his friends laugh and exchange quips—inside jokes about work, life, and love.

This is the LGBT Meetup in Trenton, and this is not your typical social activity for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD).

Truitt is the founder of SNAP (Special Needs Alliance for Pride) and the evening is part of a monthly gathering of LGBTQ adults (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, as well as those who are questioning their sexuality) who live, work, and socialize in the greater Trenton area. Supported by staff and executive leadership from Arc Mercer, Ray and other members of SNAP meet and find a community in which they can deepen friendship, build connections, and have fun.

SNAP was launched in June 2017 during National Gay Pride Month. Its mission is to support the integration of people with developmental



Ray Truitt (left) and Trenton LGBT Meetup Organizer Elvin Montero (right) at Trenton Social.

disabilities who identify as LGBTQ into the broader LGBTQ community, and thereby reduce isolation. It is one of the only groups of its kind in the nation.

SNAP was launched in June 2017 during National Gay Pride Month. Its mission is to support the integration of people with developmental disabilities who identify as LGBTQ into the broader LGBTQ community, and thereby reduce isolation.

In addition to monthly social groups, SNAP provides counseling and behavioral supports to members, as well as outreach to local colleges.

“What makes SNAP so unique is that it is not a ‘disability only’ group. The goal is to provide support so folks can be fully integrated and become part of the larger LGBTQ community,” said Steve Cook, Executive Director of Arc Mercer.

Cook helped Truitt start the group after seeing him struggle with communicating his sexuality. Cook and his staff searched online for a support group, and found only one group in Connecticut that offered behavioral support and counseling.

“We wanted more. We wanted full inclusion,” he said.

Elvin Montero, the Chair of Trenton LGBT Meetup, believes that the integration of SNAP members into the larger LGBTQ community is vital.

“The Meetup is a place to relax and enjoy the company of friends; it is open to anyone and on a good day as many as 50 people attend. Here, SNAP members can network and meet other adults in a fun, safe environment. This is a group of folks that the LGBTQ community has overlooked, so we are really happy to welcome them,” said Montero.

24-year-old Tyshawn Atkins is part of SNAP, and comes to Trenton Social to meet other people and connect.

“I had friends before, but by coming here I really get to know them. I just want to uplift others. I don’t discriminate, you know. This is just people being people,” he said.

Coming Out

The experience of “coming out,” in which a person acknowledges their sexual orientation/gender identity to themselves, and possibly, to friends and

family, can be a huge challenge. It is not a singular experience. In fact, it is an ongoing process that is repeated over time, and with new friends, colleagues, and co-workers.

“I remember how hard it was for me when I came out to my family,” said Cook. “I wrote them a letter, and even then, I stuttered. And in 2013, when I ran for public office, I had to come out all over again—it was the same anxiety, so when Ray showed hesitation, and questioning, I knew he needed support,” said Cook.

New Jersey Assemblyman Reed Gusciora (D-Mercer), the first openly gay member of the state Legislature and an Arc Mercer board member, also can identify with Truitt’s struggle.

“Being the first openly gay member of the New Jersey Legislature, I can appreciate the challenge of having no peers to call on for support and advice. The fact that Arc Mercer took this on and filled the void is terrific,” he said.

Ray Truitt has an easy smile that will sneak up on you. Animated and with a dry sense of humor, Ray, 31, enjoys tennis and singing. He has become a leader and spokesperson for SNAP.

Ray recalls a lack of support around his sexuality in high school. “I think I was the only gay person there,” he recalls. “It would have been helpful to have support back then.”

When he was 17 years old, Ray came out to his parents.

“It was not easy,” he recalled, “I sat them down. My mom knew already; she asked, ‘Why did it take you so long to tell me?’ Telling my dad was another story but in time, he got used to the idea.”

After graduation Ray cared for his parents, both of whom died of cancer within a year of each other, at which time he moved to the Trenton area into a sponsor home. It was then that he became affiliated with Arc Mercer, through their employment supports

and later, through residential services in his own apartment.

SNAP has provided Ray with life-changing support, friendship, and counseling.

“Monica (Quaste) and the men’s group really helped me embrace who I am and helped me be happy with who I am,” he said.

A self-described performer, Ray would like to speak at conferences and do presentations to other groups to help them through what was for him, another difficult chapter: coming out to Steve Cook, the Executive Director of Arc Mercer, the agency that was supporting him.

“I trusted him, but at first I was nervous to tell him, because I didn’t know what his reaction would be. I just told him I was struggling a lot,” said Ray. “He understood me right away.”

“Even though I am disabled, I am also gay. I tell people ‘Don’t be afraid of who you are. Just be who you are.’”





Members of the Arc Mercer's SNAP Program Socializing at the Trenton LGBT Meeting event at Trenton Social in November, 2017.

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Sexuality: The Final Frontier

Today, many people with I/DD have choices, freedoms, and supports around work and where to live, but there is often no discussion or support around relationships, sexuality, or sexual orientation. Acknowledging that people with I/DD are sexual beings is a relatively new area, and still faces outdated ideas, especially for those who identify as LGBTQ.

According to Cook, agencies and support staff must learn to navigate the delicate balance of freedoms and the need for support and supervision, an effort that can be hampered by personal biases of family members and guardians, support staff, and even case managers.

“For typical kids, the moment of freedom comes the day they get the keys to the car—but for folks like Ray, that day did not come. He still wants and needs freedom,” said Cook.

“Freedom is essential to true community integration. Whether it is for LGBTQ adults—or any adult who wants to develop relationships with

other people, we need to find a way to offer more independence and more privacy.”

Cook sees a culture and climate in many organizations that discourages physical contact, even hand-holding and hugging.

“We really need to reexamine that,” he said. “Our task is to empower people to make the choices they choose, not the choices we make for them. That is successful inclusion.”

Joseph Gleason, Administrator of Residential Services at Arc Mercer, recognizes that it can be especially hard for parents and caregivers to see their adult children as sexual beings

“They still see a child. We see adults,” he said.

Filling the Void

Activists have noted that many LGBTQ individuals are still openly harassed and called out. The process of navigating the intricacies of sexual orientation and discovery can be isolating and peppered with emotional land mines for anyone, but even more so for a person with I/DD. SNAP helps



At an event earlier in 2017, SNAP members mingled with fellow LGBTQ community members and allies. (from left to right) Arc Mercer Executive Director, Steve Cook, Lt. Governor Sheila Oliver, Trenton Councilwoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, Ray Truitt, Andrew Monti, Elvin Montero, and Assemblyman Reed Gusciora.



not only by providing supports for social outings, but also with counseling, behavioral supports, and healthcare information and education.

According to Monica Quaste, LPC, the Director of Behavioral Services at Arc Mercer, SNAP is not just for LGBTQ folks, but also for anyone who wants to join.

“This group is about relationships, connection, and friendships. Members share advice, offer each other guidance, and help each other with personal and relationship challenges,” she said.

Quaste met Truitt about six years ago. “We started a men’s group for Ray because he was having a hard time forming friendships with straight men. The group worked on social skills, and how to be friends,” she said.

Quaste believes that the group has helped participants—now numbering 15—get their

emotional needs met in ways that are more healthy and safe.

“Ray had been meeting people online. He was really vulnerable and at risk of being taken advantage of. Because he has these connections now, he knows he is cared for,” she concluded.

“Many people in the group did not feel like they fit in at social situations and did not have the self-confidence to make friends,” she said.

The group does more than provide support—it also has an educational component with a focus on the importance of safe sex.

“We talk about what it means to be someone’s girlfriend or boyfriend, and not being pressured to have sex or give someone money just to have a friendship,” added Quaste. “The group works as a team to help participants make healthy choices.”

Because Arc Mercer has an affiliated health center, SNAP can also provide healthcare as needed.

Quaste often goes to the Trenton Social Meetup with SNAP after work, because it helps her get to know people better.

“It breaks down barriers and builds connections because you are relating person to person, not as staff,” Quaste said.

Steve Cook believes that Arc Mercer can be a model for other agencies to show how providers can support freedoms while still providing support, and plans to bring this issue to The Arc

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—Monica Quaste

national conference in Nashville, Tennessee next summer.

“What a teachable moment for staff to see us as leaders in the organization supporting LGBTQ participants. We are trying to model how staff can support and accommodate LGBT relationships with the hope that other more traditional relationships can grow and thrive too,” Cook said.

“Ray did the hard part, the most courageous part. He is part of a leadership to set up something that is the first of its kind in the nation. He is making history.” **P&F**

Resources:

Book: “Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender People With Developmental Disabilities and Mental Retardation

Stories of the Rainbow Support Group”

(2003) by John D. Allen

It Gets Better Project

Dedicated to communicating to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth around the world that it gets better, and to create and inspire the changes needed to make it better for them.

<http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>

The Trevor Project

The leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) young people ages 13-24.

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

TrevorLifeLine

Trained counselors can provide support 24/7. Young people in crisis, feeling suicidal, or in need of a safe and judgment-free place to talk, can call 866-488-7386, text “Trevor” to 1-202-304-1200, or IM live with a counselor. They also offer a safe space online forum “TrevorSpace”

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

The GLBT National Help Center Hotline:

1-888-THE-GLNH (888-843-4564)

Youth Talkline:

1-800-246-PRIDE
(800-246-7743)