

LGBTQ residents stand up for Texas pride with group, parade five years after assault case

By Sara Samora | The Herald-Zeitung Jun 22, 2019

When Sami Vela sat down for breakfast at a Mexican restaurant Wednesday morning, a waitress approached her.

“Have you seen my friend? Do you still see her?”

“I saw her yesterday,” Vela said. “Wait... was it yesterday or the day before?”

“Well when you see her, tell my friend I said, ‘Hi,’” the waitress said, walking away.

“I will!” Vela said.

Once the waitress was out of sight, Vela said, “She’s asking about Aliah.”

Her friend, Aliah Hernandez, used to work at the restaurant, and she used to live in New Braunfels.

But Hernandez has not lived in New Braunfels since 2017.

And she hasn’t felt safe in this town since she was brutally beaten.

“She almost died,” Vela said.

According to a Texas Monthly article, Hernandez revealed to the man she’s a transgender woman when they met up at a motel after her shift ended.

The man, Cameron Wright, allegedly confessed to beating Hernandez and there is photographic evidence of her injuries.

However, even after her case was presented in front of a grand jury twice, (the second time, by Comal County District Attorney Jennifer Tharp), the grand jury did not indict him.

Tharp filed a Class A misdemeanor charge against Wright, interfering with an emergency call. He had stolen Hernandez’s phone, preventing her from calling the police.

He pleaded guilty to the misdemeanor and was sentenced to probation, along with 18 months of community service and a \$480 fine.

Meanwhile, Vela said Hernandez no longer feels safe and is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

“Where is her justice?” Vela said.

Times are a’changin’ (slowly)

On Monday, June 24, Mayor Barron Casteel will sign a proclamation stating June is Pride Month in New Braunfels.

And on Thursday, June 27, River City Advocacy will host the town's inaugural Pride event.

Vela said she was surprised when she heard about the event and proclamation the city was doing the following week.

"You're going to have something here where a criminal is still free and you want us to be free and loud?" she said. "I mean no. Like what is the point that they want to make by having something like that?"

She added that it's like a target on the LGBTQ's back.

"The (New Braunfels) community is not ready," she said.

The LGBTQ culture has made its way onto mainstream with successful shows like "Will & Grace" and Drag Race airing on VH1.

On June 20, Janet Mock became the first trans woman to sign a three-year multi-million dollar deal with Netflix.

Still, the LGBTQ community faces discrimination. According to the Williams Institute, Texas is one of 28 states that do not have statutes protecting them from discrimination in employment, education, housing, credit, public accommodations or other settings.

Earlier in June, Out Leadership, an advisory firm, rated Texas 45th for business environments, and gave the state a grade of 38.07 out of 100 points.

“Unfortunately, I’m not shocked,” said Emmett Schelling, executive director for the Transgender Education Network of Texas. “We’ve seen session after session of elected officials once again failing to represent all of their constituents.”

Then on June 11, Governor Greg Abbott signed Senate Bill 1978, dubbed the “Save Chick-fil-A” bill. The bill stated that “a governmental entity may not take any adverse action against any person based wholly or partly on a person’s belief or action in accordance with the person’s sincerely held religious belief or moral conviction, including beliefs or convictions regarding marriage.”

In short, state and local government cannot discriminate against people with religious beliefs.

Schelling said what they’ve seen is shameful rhetoric being used as fodder to attempt to “save Chick-Fil-A” instead of seeing proactive bills being pushed forward and passed that would ensure that all Texans are treated with dignity and respect.

“It’s ridiculous, and last I checked nobody is going to try to shut Chick-fil-A down,” he said

Vela said Hernandez is still looking for a job.

Free to be you and me

In May, the World Health Organization removed the “gender identity disorder” diagnosis from its global manual of diagnoses.

This means being transgender will no longer be considered a mental health disorder.

Still, five transgender women have been murdered in June, three of them in Texas.

According to the Movement Advancement Project, Texas is one of the states that does not prohibit the use of gay or trans panic, the legal defense that claims the victim's sexual orientation or gender identity contributed to the defendant's actions.

Vela said she wonders if trans panic was utilized in the local grand jury.

Vela is a transgender woman herself. When she was growing up in New Braunfels, she said she had been spit on, her hair had been pulled, and she was called all kinds of names.

"I never came out in high school, but if I did I would have been like the people who came out in high school," she said. "The few people that I know that did come out, they all dropped out, never graduated, which is sad."

The struggle and change

When Nathan Lopez was a sophomore in high school in 2013, he moved away from New Braunfels to live with his father in San Antonio.

At the time, he said he was suffering with depression, and had attempted to die by suicide.

“Everyone thought it would be best if I had a change of environment,” Lopez said. “Down to a different school, I guess, try a different way of living, because where I was at the moment wasn’t working.”

His mother, Yesenia Voigt, said she had been trying to get him to see a therapist since he was younger because she noticed something was off.

“He like, internalized everything and I just didn’t know what it was, but he was really good at not speaking when he would go see therapists, like, literally they couldn’t get him to say anything.”

When he began junior high, she said there was a huge, drastic change. She thought it was teenage hormones. But then Lopez went from introverted to really introverted.

“And you know, always in hoodies, hiding everything, started cutting — you know all this stuff,” Voigt said.

It got worse when he started high school, even though Lopez came out to Voigt during his freshman year.

“So I thought that once that happened, ‘OK, that’s what was wrong, everything’s fine,’” she said.

Still, it didn’t get better. She found out about the suicide attempts.

The first one she knew about. One of his friends called her and said to check on him. The friend told Voigt that Lopez was trying to kill himself.

The second attempt, she walked in on Lopez.

Since she already knew about the first one, she was on pins and needles; she secured the house of everything and anything she could possibly think of.

But then she walked in on him when he was in his closet. He had found an old pencil sharpener with a dull blade.

“He was literally trying to slit his wrists,” Voigt said.

She found out about more attempts, that he had been trying to do it different ways and “thank God he wasn’t successful.”

“And then I felt like a horrible mother,” Voigt said. “How did I not know this? But he was so quiet that I just thought he wanted to be alone.”

When he moved to San Antonio, Lopez changed for the better. Suddenly, he was talkative. He was able to be himself.

And it was in Lopez’s junior year when he finally came out to Voigt as transgender.

He still lives in San Antonio, only returning to New Braunfels to visit Voigt and other family and friends.

Voigt has gone to the capitol to protest anti-LGBTQ bills.

“You know what, I wish all these politicians would put themselves back, and don’t even think of yourself as a politician, don’t think of the fact that you’re going to run on the next election, just try to put yourself in the position of a parent,” Voigt said. “And even if you don’t understand the issue — let’s say you have no idea how it feels to be the mother or a father of a transgender person — but try to just have empathy towards that person and know that they’re trying to protect their child.”

Voigt is also the treasurer for the new LGBTQ organization in New Braunfels, Riverside Pride.

Many of Lopez’s friends are either not out to their parents, or their parents are not accepting. However, he said he brags about his mother a lot, telling people his mom’s on the board for the LGBT organization.

“I don’t know if it’s weird for, like, a kid to be proud of their parents but I am,” Lopez said. “And you know when we were scheduling this (interview) ourselves, I tell them I’m doing this with my mom and my friends will be like, ‘Your mom’s so cool.’”

Finding acceptance

Fortunately for Vela, she said her parents have accepted her all her life, and she never had to come out to them. When she began to transition, they didn’t question her. She was their daughter.

Vela also said if it weren’t for her parents, she would not be living in New Braunfels. She would live somewhere else.

She doesn't work in the town, and she doesn't shop here either. She's blunt, and is open about who she is.

Still, it doesn't stop her from wanting to always look behind her, especially after what happened to Hernandez and the Texas Monthly article came out.

"I honestly feel like I'm going to die in a crime, I don't know why," Vela said. "Isn't that horrible to say? But I always feel that way."

She doesn't think there is a safe space in the city. To her, it prompts a message that people can kill someone and nothing will happen to them.

"There's no consequences for doing that," Vela said. "You know you need to make this right with the community. How you going to go ahead and have a safe place when you can't even do anything for a community when it came time to get right?"

She's thinking about attending the Pride event on Thursday.

"Maybe," Vela said.

One person Vela would like to see on Thursday is district attorney Tharp.

"That would be interesting," she said.

MORE INFORMATION

First Pride event will be a family outing