

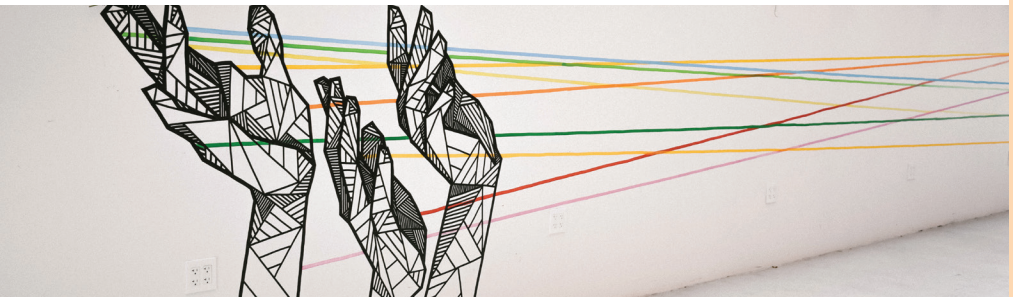
SHENANDOAH LGBTQ CENTER DECEMBER NEWS

SUPPORT GROUPS

Our peer-to-peer support groups have successfully weathered a difficult year. In April we moved groups to an online, secure Zoom platform, only to find that our youth were “zoomed out” and needed to meet in person. Since the summer, we have continued our monthly trans support group online, met with a dozen youth through monthly in-person groups, and added an online group for parents and caregivers of trans youth. Through it all, our counseling partners at The ARROW Project have adapted and served our clients with compassion and grace.

We’re grateful to Augusta Health Community Outreach for renewed financial support of these groups in 2021 and hope to be able to restart the adult LGBTQ group that didn’t survive the transition to virtual meetings. If you’re interested in adult LGBTQ peer support, please email us at [hello@shenlgbtqcenter.org](mailto:hello@shenlgbtqcenter.org) so we can gauge interest.

We’re also excited to be partnering with Harrisonburg’s Strength in Peers to offer monthly STI testing at the Center as well as a peer support group for people living with HIV. There is a scarcity of support for these individuals in the Valley, and we hope to strengthen relationships and improve access to testing in the coming year.



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CLOTHES CLOSET

In November, several dedicated volunteers pitched in to spruce up the clothes closet, making order out of the chaos of all the wonderful donations we’ve had since the summer. Everything is now neatly displayed on tables, shelves, and racks, and warm season clothing is tucked away in bins awaiting spring.

We’ve been very selective and can confidently say that the selections we offer are of good quality, free from stains and tears, and in a variety of sizes. We are proud to offer this FREE resource to anyone in need, and we need shoppers! Please help us spread the word and make an appointment to check us out! Contact [assistant@shenlgbtqcenter.org](mailto:assistant@shenlgbtqcenter.org) for more information or an appointment.



SHENANDOAH LGBTQ CENTER NEWS DECEMBER 2020



from the EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Warning: I’m about to state the obvious. This year was HARD - in so many ways. And who we were and where we were in January 2020 has completely changed in the eleven months since. But I’m here to tell you there is so much good news amidst all the stress and worry and loss.

With the temporary closure of our physical space in March, we felt such loss in our connections with clients old and new. We missed our monthly potlucks, game nights, movie nights, special events, and the casual atmosphere of drop in hours. We missed seeing each other in person for support groups.

But the time away has also allowed us to look at some of our more ambitious projects aimed at changing systems in our communities to help LGBTQ people thrive. Throughout this newsletter, you’ll read about new initiatives we’re putting together that will dramatically change outcomes and experiences for queer people throughout the Shenandoah Valley.

Ever since I can remember, my mother has had a small framed embroidery piece in a visible spot in our family home. It reads, “Bloom Where You Are Planted”. As a child and a young adult, that little proverb made me feel defiant. Bloom here? In Staunton? No way! I wanted to get out, to see the world, to CHANGE the world, and it wasn’t going to be in my tiny hometown where everybody knew who (and whose) I was.

I moved back to Staunton in 2003 to begin a family. Seventeen years later, I have four amazing children, a home in a neighborhood full of friends, and a career I never could have imagined. The fact that I am actually blooming where I was planted right here in Staunton has allowed me to leverage connections in a way I couldn’t have anywhere else. Working together with my high school classmates, my parents’ friends and colleagues, and new friends I’ve met in various ways since my return, our community is creating real change for LGBTQIA+ people in the Shenandoah Valley.

I am grateful to all of you who are reading this newsletter. Grateful to know you, to be connected to you, to have you in our corner as we continue to grow beyond our wildest dreams. I invite you to contribute in whatever ways you are able and inspired to - with gifts of funds, time, networking, whatever moves you. Know that the Center is STILL OPEN by appointment for consultations, library browsing, and clothes closet shopping. Thank you for keeping us going this year, and may your new year shine bright.

*In Solidarity and Resilience,*  
Emily Sproul

NEW STAFF

In October, we welcomed a new staff member to the Shenandoah LGBTQ Center! Jen Jones had been volunteering regularly at our drop-in hours before the pandemic and was a vital part of our Pride 2020 planning team. With the growth of the Center we needed someone to coordinate programming and help with clients, and were thrilled to hire Jen part-time as our Assistant Director for Programming and Client Services. Jen brings her experience working with New Directions Center and Mary Baldwin University and is leveraging those connections and skills to enhance our growing scope of programming. We’re so grateful to have her on board, and look forward to an exciting new year of programming!

BOARD MEMBER APPRECIATION

The time has come... the Center is now entering its third year since our founding, and that means that several of our founding board members are stepping down to make room for new voices and perspectives. We are so grateful to Cole Troxell (top), AnhThu Nguyen (middle), and Rocky Parker (bottom) for their passionate service over the past two years. Their vision has helped shape the Center and build a strong organization that is ready for growth.



# SHENANDOAH LGBTQ CENTER DECEMBER NEWS

## ADDRESSING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Over the last two years, we at the Center have talked in abstract terms about LGBTQ youth homelessness. We've been aware of national statistics that 40% of homeless youth in America identify as LGBTQ. We know that the resources for these youth are scarce, and that rural areas present additional challenges to sheltering this vulnerable population.

More recently, that conversation has hit close to home as we have come to know several youth facing imminent homelessness upon turning 18 and/or graduation from high school. Some of these youth are being kicked out by their families for being LGBTQ, while others are seeking to escape toxic home situations and family conflict.

We felt compelled to act, and began exploring options to create transitional housing for these youth and others like them so they can have a safe and stable place to navigate their new independence. We reached out to staff at Valley Community Services Board to learn more about local homelessness statistics, and found that we're not alone in our urgent desire to serve this population.

That conversation has led to a grant application that we hope will start us on a path to offering supportive housing as early as summer of 2021. Though we won't know until at least March whether our grant application is successful, we are fired up about the possibilities and are actively working to develop plans and ideas so we can act quickly once awards are made.

We're so grateful to our partners at VCSB for their hard work and commitment to this grant and this project, and we look forward to our deepening relationship as we co-create this dream to give hope to LGBTQ youth.



## COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Executive Director Emily Sproul has recently been selected to serve with two local advocacy groups focused on bringing greater equity to our community.

Beginning in January, she will be working with the Greater Augusta Wellness Partnership, whose mission is to be a catalyst for promoting collaborative, active partnerships to sustain a healthy community in the Greater Augusta region. The partnership brings together a network of agencies focused on the social determinants of health and their impact on psychological, physical, and economic health.

Sproul has also been appointed to serve on the Equity Committee for Staunton City Public Schools. Together, this group of more than twenty local citizens representing parents, students, alumni, and community members will look at the current state of equity in the school district and develop plans and policies to address disparities for minority groups. In addition to addressing racial inequities, Sproul looks forward to the opportunity to address the needs of LGBTQ students and help the school system comply with recent legislation requiring protection and support for transgender students.

Additionally, Sproul was invited to join a call with Governor Northam's Secretary of the Commonwealth to explore the need for an LGBTQ Advisory Board for the Commonwealth. Current advisory boards include the African American Advisory Board, Asian Advisory Board, Council on Women, and Latino Advisory Board. Formation of such a board would allow LGBTQ leaders across the Commonwealth to meet directly with the governor's staff to advocate for legislation and project funding for LGBTQ Virginians. Sproul is hopeful that the advisory board will come to fruition and is eager to apply for a seat to advocate for the needs of rural LGBTQ Virginians.

## UPCOMING PROGRAMMING IN 2021



### COOKING

This fall we debuted several cooking episodes in a series we called Sunday Supper with Jen. Our Assistant Director led Facebook Live viewers through the steps to create basic, healthy, affordable meals in an effort to improve nutrition and financial fitness among our clients. In 2021, those cooking sessions will become online courses in basic cooking techniques and an in-depth look at "Eating the Rainbow" to achieve better physical and mental health. Look for registration information in late January.

### DRAMA

In February, friends of the Center will team up with our Assistant Director to host a drama workshop focused on "what you wish you'd said". The workshop will be an opportunity for participants to write their own scripts in which they reimagine past conversations or unspoken conversations in a different and more honest way. They'll then have the opportunity to act out that conversation with other participants. Led by dramatist and founder of Silver Line Theater Company, Jeremy West, counselor Alexis Wagner, and our own Jen Jones, veteran actress with ShenanArts and the Wayne Theater, this experience promises to be cathartic for participants.

### YOGA

Uma White, a member of our Parent Support Group, has recently received her certification as a yoga instructor. She would like to share her gifts with our Center clients who may have felt hesitant to try yoga before. Our sessions will likely begin virtually, but may move outdoors as the weather improves. Stay tuned for this pay-what-you-will opportunity!



# SHENANDOAH LGBTQ CENTER DECEMBER NEWS

## PRIDE 2021

Staunton Pride

Planning is underway for next year's Pride! We're still up against pandemic challenges, and are considering ALL options, so there's lots of contingency planning. But the organizers are working hard to find ways for us to be together to celebrate safely. If you're interested in helping with Pride in any way, please contact the leadership team, headed by AnhThu Nguyen, at [hello@stauntonpride.org](mailto:hello@stauntonpride.org).

## LEGAL FUND

In July of this year, we were contacted by a donor who wanted to create a legal fund through the Shenandoah LGBTQ Center, aimed at breaking negative cycles for LGBTQIA+ people involved in any way with the justice system.

Over the past several months, we have talked with community stakeholders about how we might best use those funds to have the most impact. Our current focus is community re-entry for those who have been incarcerated. Individuals can apply for financial assistance with court costs, housing deposits, inpatient detox programs, and DMV fees simply by filling out a form from our website (<https://www.shenlgbtqcenter.org/legal-resources>).

As we continue our community conversations, we hope to expand the ways in which these funds can help prevent LGBTQ people from becoming involved in the justice system as well as other ways to support those who are working towards a new start.

## LIBRARY - NEW SELECTIONS

We've had some great donations to our Queer Resource Library over the last few months. Books both old and new have streamed in from generous donors and our shelves are packed! The library continues to be open by appointment if you need a book or two to get you through the winter. Checkouts are for up to a month, so you have plenty of time to enjoy! Browse our library catalog on our website, and contact [assistant@shenlgbtqcenter.org](mailto:assistant@shenlgbtqcenter.org) to make an appointment to grab your next great read!

## NEW NOVEL BY LOCAL LGBTQ AUTHOR

The Shenandoah LGBTQ Center is proud to congratulate our dear friend Allison Garcia on the completion of her latest novel! As part of NaNoWriMo, Allison spent the month of November crafting more than 50,000 words that will become her latest and first LGBTQ novel, "The Dry Depths of My Soul".

Allison works as a mental health and substance use therapist in Harrisonburg and is the local liaison for the NaNoWriMo program that challenges participants to write 50,000 words in one month. Her previous published books center on the experience of Latino immigrants and all of her works also draw on her Christian faith.

You can read more about Allison's latest endeavor in the Harrisonburg Daily News Record ([Harrisonburg Author Strives To Promote Diversity In Christian Fiction](https://www.harrisonburgauthorstrives.com) | [Dnronline](https://dnronline.com) | [dnronline.com](https://dnronline.com))

## CONVERSATIONS WITH AUGUSTA HEALTH

In August, Executive Director Emily Sproul gave a grant report to the Augusta Health Community Grant committee to discuss the impact of our 2020 grant that funded our peer-to-peer support groups. As the conversation deepened, the question of LGBTQ healthcare in the Valley was raised and it was determined we needed further discussion around the complexities involved in queer people seeking medical care locally.

In October, the board of Shenandoah LGBTQ Center met with Augusta Health executives and Community Grant committee members to discuss barriers to healthcare experienced by LGBTQ people in the Shenandoah Valley. We followed up with a high level training for executives and organizational stakeholders in December, laying the groundwork for future collaboration around improving healthcare options for LGBTQ people.

Shenandoah LGBTQ Center's board is very excited to be entering into this collaboration and bringing our research and qualitative data to bear on best practices for all areas of healthcare here in our community.

## HOW YOU HAVE SAVED A LIFE

As we've rounded out our second year, the staff of the Shenandoah LGBTQ Center has been reflecting on the progress that some of our early clients have achieved. We've witnessed new friendships and relationships, celebrated milestones like name changes and HRT treatments, and rejoiced as young people moved forward in independence. These successes have underscored the importance of our work in providing safe spaces for the LGBTQ community to gather and offering resources specific to the queer experience.

Recently I spoke with one of our clients about how far we had all come in two years. They shared with me that the Center had literally saved their life a number of times. As someone who struggles with suicidal ideation, they had sometimes set out in their car with the thought that they might just drive off the side of a mountain and make their death seem like an accident. They'd make a deal with themselves to drive to the Center and see if that helped, and if not, they could always have their "accident" on the way home. Every time they came to the Center, they found a reason to stay alive. They found connection and belonging that kept them from ending it all.

This and many other stories like it remain at the core of our work as a Center. Providing a supportive community and affirming resources is not just a tagline or a mission statement. It literally saves the lives of people right here in our community.

If you've been part of supporting the Shenandoah LGBTQ Center in any way over the last two years, know that YOU have made an incredible impact for queer people throughout the Shenandoah Valley.