Meet the Merry Makers

Behind the scenes of some of the season's most beloved LGBT traditions

Deck the halls and grab youringle babbies. The holidays are here, so let's queue—if you know where to look. Through the tire of our tradition filled with many timelessly traditions, LGBT tales have often been left out. Some are made to feel untold when at their family's Thanksgiving table. Oftentimes stories are altered out of familial customs. Many times simply find it difficult to achieve that holiday cheer during a time when the night of LGBT people, and other marginalized groups, feel incredibly under threat.

But one of the greatest things about being out (or in, or in-transit, etc.) is that we can also get to build chosen families within our community, with whom to share in the joy of our existence. So here are a handful of LGBT-centric local traditions to light up your not-so-silent nights. They shine brighter than a full moon, and we love them.

Celebration of Life

This year, the Boston Living Center marks the 30th anniversary of its annual tradition—and maybe, just maybe, the birth of a new one. Once again, the BLC is a community and resource center that provides support and services for HIV-positive members, who will host the Celebration of Life, a yearly event that turns the Hynes Convention Center into a massive dinner party for members and their guests, giving those living with illness—many of whom are dealing with other issues, like housing instability or addiction—a supportive reprieve from a world that can still stigmatize. But for the first time since it launched in 1989, the Celebration of Life will not be held in conjunction with Thanksgiving. Instead, the event will take place on December 14, renamed as a more general "Holiday Party."

Depending on how the party plays out, it may or may not be a permanent move, says Marc Davino, vice president of development and communications at the BLC's parent nonprofit Victory Programs. The BLC is now looking to host its largest crowd to date: 1,000 people—and has set a fundraising goal of $333,000 between corporate sponsors, individual contributors and the donated "bids" secured by over 300 volunteer servers from our supportive friends, family, and coworkers.

The timing change was a necessary one because the Hynes Convention Center, which has donated the space to the BLC for decades—saving about $50,000 for the organization, says Davino—was unable to accommodate the usual date. The move received the thumbs up from an advisory board of BLC members and from the sister of the late Peter Clark, a founding BLC member who helped launch the annual dinner. The first Celebration of Life was actually held in a private home, a grassroots effort to bring HIV-positive men together for comfort and support during the height of the AIDS epidemic.

Of course, much has changed since then—and so has the BLC. Davino says the organization has evolved to recognize the changing face of the disease—communities of color are now disproportionately represented in new infections, for instance—and evolve programs and services. There's a larger emphasis on nutrition and wellness services, recognizing that HIV-positive people, with proper care, now live much longer lives.

The Celebration of Life has a chance to evolve now, too. This year's dinner will feature sing-along and drag entertainment—including performer Verna Turbulence, whose out-of-elastic alter ego, Danielle Faucher, will receive this year's Peter Daniel Tucker Award for his advocacy on behalf of those with HIV/AIDS. For the past 20 years, Faucher's "Drag Brunch" events have raised between $50,000 and $100,000 annually for the BLC.

Owing to the early, devastating impact that AIDS had on the gay community, LGBT folks continue to be heavily represented among BLC supporters, says Davino. Perhaps it's also because we have an acute understanding of what it means to feel alienated and stigmatized.

"So many LGBT people know what it is like to be without family support, and be left totally on your own," says Davino.

This year's Celebration of Life also marks a personal anniversary for Davino. It will be 10 years since his first attended dinner as a volunteer, joined by his mother. He came on board the organization shortly after, but the dinner still holds a special place in his heart. He keeps a thank-you note from a grateful guest on his desk as inspiration and motivation.

"The love you feel in that world is incomparable," says Davino. "It doesn't feel like a job."

For more information on the Celebration of Life or to volunteer, visit spirit.org.

Community Servings' 25th Annual "Pie in the Sky"

The Boston Living Center's Celebration of Life is not the only food-focused event for the HIV-positive community that is celebrating a milestone.

This year also marks the 25th anniversary of Pie in the Sky, a fundraiser founded by Community Servings CEO David Waters as a response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The annual event takes Thanksgiving dessert-making off our shoulders by selling pies professionally baked by dozens of participating restaurants. In its first year, the event sold about 1,000 pies and raised approximately $25,000. A quarter-century later, it sells over 22,000 pies and raises approximately $185,000 annually for the Jamaica Plain-based organization.

Community Servings has evolved and grown too. It began as a coalition delivering hot, nutritious meals to those homebound with HIV/AIDS, but has since expanded its services to care for clients—over 80 percent living in poverty—with more than 35 different life-threatening illnesses. How about 50,000 free meals are delivered to 1,350 people per year over 300 square miles of eastern Massachusetts.

Earlier this year, Boston Spirit talked to David Waters about the impetus behind Pie in the Sky, which he launched in 1993, six years before he became Community Servings CEO.

"I was starting out in theater and restaurants during that scariest time of AIDS, and there was a tremendous amount of loss in those communities," he said. "Both communities were early to galvanize. I came to Community Servings to find my own response to the fear of HIV."

Pie in the Sky has been an amazing response, any way you slice it.

For more information or to order pies, visit servings.org.