

Brotherhood by the beach: GAYLA retreat returns to Saco

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Bradley Cohen leads a parade through Ferry Beach Park Association on Sunday celebrating the 40th GAYLA retreat. LIZ GOTTHELF/Journal Tribune

SACO — Since 1979, the annual GAYLA retreat, held at the Ferry Beach Park Association retreat and conference center, has offered a supportive environment for gay men to relax, build friendships, grow in their spirituality and learn about themselves.

The 40th Gayla retreat began July 14 at the oceanside retreat center and continues through July 21. Organizers say it's the longest running retreat "for men who love men."

This year there are about 91 men from across the country at the conference. About 17 of these are newcomers.

"It's a beautiful mix of people," said Bradley Cohen, of Boston, Massachusetts.

Cohen first came to GAYLA in 1991, and he hasn't missed a summer since.

"This is such a joyous, safe, celebratory place to affirm who I am as a gay man," said Cohen.

Cohen said the supportive environment at the retreat gives him a confidence he carries with him the rest of the year.

The retreat offers plenty to do including chapel services, workshops on art and other subjects, small discussion groups and recreational activities. Activities include a tea dance, talent show, volleyball tournament, family feud competition and a daily 7 a.m. swim in the ocean.

And all activities are optional, said Cohen.

“This is the summer camp we never had,” said Cohen. “We’re right on the beach. You can hear the waves crashing.”

GAYLA members also take time out one evening during the week to remember former GAYLA attendees who are no longer living in a remembrance service.

John Crowe and his husband Kip Plaisted have been going to GAYLA for about a decade. They said the environment at GAYLA is unlike anything they experience in their lives outside the retreat. The couple moved from Maine to Washington, D.C., for Crowe’s career, and the two men said they don’t know if they could have made that move without the support from their friends at GAYLA.

“For a lot of people, this is a spiritual home,” said Ferry Beach Park Association Executive Director Cathy Stackpole.

The retreat center is described online as “an open and welcoming place for all, informed by the traditions of Unitarian Universalism.”

Cohen said that GAYLA members have become an integral part of the Ferry Beach Park Association community and noted that members of GAYLA have sat on the retreat center’s board.

“We’ve been embraced here,” he said.

Ron Willett of Lowell, Massachusetts, has been going to GAYLA for 18 years. He serves on the Ferry Beach Park Board of Directors.

“It’s a good balance of fun and spirituality,” he said.

Willett said he was a government lawyer in Washington, D.C., when a friend of his said he needed a vacation and suggested he go to GAYLA.

“I didn’t know I needed what was here,” he said.

Willett said at the retreat he discovered what a healthy male relationship looks like.

Willett, who had no affiliation to anything spiritual, discovered the Unitarian Church and is now very active in the church. He also met his spouse at the retreat.

“Everything changed,” he said.

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