



## Destination 2017: Orlando

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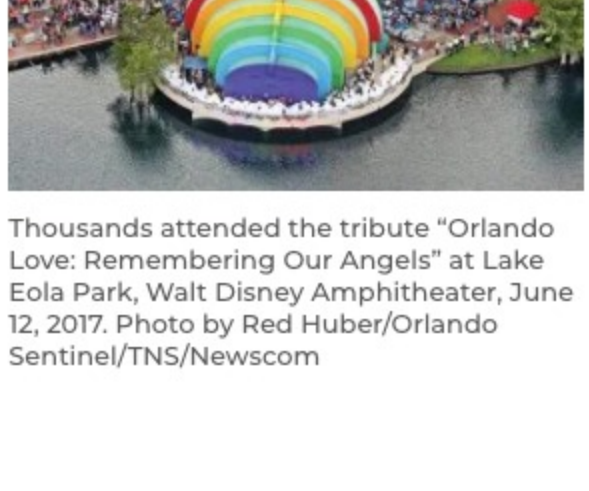
DESTINATION 2017: NEW YORK

The Pulse murderer sought to destroy Orlando's spirit, but the city's response shows that Orlando is bonded by a spirit that even its residents may not have appreciated. This is the story of how a city emerged from tragedy stronger than before.

DESTINATION 2017: SALT LAKE CITY



Mourners gather and comfort each other at the memorial outside of Pulse to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the shooting, June 12, 2017. Photo by Joe Raedle/Getty



Thousands attended the tribute "Orlando Love: Remembering Our Angels" at Lake Eola Park, Walt Disney Amphitheater, June 12, 2017. Photo by Red Huber/Orlando Sentinel/TNS/Newscom



Mourners gathered at the U.S. embassy in Berlin for a vigil for the Pulse victims, June 18, 2016. Photo by Adam Berry/Getty Images

Traffic on South Orange Avenue is at a standstill. The right-of-way is filled with news vans and bloodmobiles. Service dogs wearing rainbow bandanas circle the crowd while church groups hand out donuts and cold water.

It's June 12, 2017, the one-year anniversary of the attacks at Pulse, a popular LGBTQ club in Orlando, Fla. Forty-nine people died when a gunman opened fire during a Latin-themed dance night. Now, at the club-turned-memorial, the names of the victims are being read aloud. Stanley Almodovar III, Amanda L. Alvear, Joel Rayon Paniagua...

It was the deadliest mass shooting in recent American history, and it happened just up the road from the "Happiest Place on Earth." Before June 12, 2016, many associated Orlando only with fairytale endings and Super Bowl wins. But on that day and in the weeks to come, outsiders saw what lay beyond the roller coasters and hotels that line Interstate 4. Orlando, it turns out, is a place where people live and love and let go at their favorite bars. It's a community where neighbors wait for hours to give blood in the name of those who can't (the U.S. Food and Drug Administration says men can't donate blood if they've had sex with another man in the past 12 months). It's a city with a downtown where today, exactly one year later, the Wells Fargo ATMs are being framed in a rainbow backdrop. "In many ways, what has happened since Pulse is that the rest of the world now sees us as we have always seen ourselves," says Karen Persis, a surrogacy lawyer who lives near the nightclub. Others have a slightly different take: that the tragedy helped Orlando see itself more clearly, while also showing the world a different side of itself than just the theme parks.

The collision of fairytale and functional city is captured in the Orange County Regional History Center's display of items collected from Pulse memorials around the world. There's a Mickey Mouse glove inscribed with "#OrlandoStrong." A Mickey Mouse-ear keychain states, "Love always wins." There are drawings of Mickey and Minnie holding candles next to photos of Pulse memorials in Berlin and Brazil, Texas and Tokyo.



A group, including Mayor Dyer, honored the Pulse victims before the start of a Major League Soccer match at Orlando's Camping World Stadium on June 18, 2016. Photo by Jacob Langston/Orlando Sentinel/Getty Images

The global outpouring of support was profound for Orlando's whole population, says Jeff Prystajko, director of marketing and communications for Orlando's Come Out With Pride festival and volunteer board member of MBA Orlando, central Florida's LGBTQ chamber of commerce. He compares it to the 1973 arson at the UpStairs Lounge in New Orleans, an event that until a year ago was the largest mass killing in the LGBTQ community: 32 people died. But instead of hosting memorials, local New Orleans churches refused the victims' remains. People said things about the deceased that were hard enough to read, let alone reprint. "How times have changed," says Prystajko. "We needed help, and the world responded with kindness and love. It can't bring back loved ones; it can't change things. But knowing there's that support and love around the world has eased some of the pain." The love for Orlando didn't just pour in; it sprung up from within. People in the city's LGBTQ community will tell you Orlando has been an especially welcoming place since Patty Sheehan, the first openly gay elected official in central Florida, joined the city council in 2000. A few years later, the city's pride festival started with a short parade around downtown. Today, it's one of the largest in the state.

Following the U.S. Supreme Court's decision legalizing gay marriage in October 2014, Orlando mayor Buddy Dyer performed a mass wedding for 44 gay couples in front of city hall on January 6, 2015—the very first day it was legal for him to do so. It was "the coolest thing I've done," Dyer says now, smiling but serious too. But everything changed last June. "After Pulse it seemed like the whole city banded together to support the LGBTQ community," says Russ Kasim, who serves on the board of the Orlando Youth Alliance, a nonprofit that aids local LGBTQ youth.

You can see that support in the rainbow flags—the six colors representing LGBTQ pride—which you'll find everywhere from the Lake Eola bandshell to the Orlando City SC Stadium. They fly from flagpoles and apartment windows next to signs proclaiming, "We are Orlando," "Love Wins" and "Orlando United," which became the mantra to honor the victims. "Orlando said, 'This is Orlando's issue,'" emphasizes Persis. "It wasn't just a gay issue or a Hispanic issue."

Anyone familiar with the world of nonprofits might not be surprised to hear that before Pulse, Orlando's Hispanic and LGBTQ community groups had worked in their own silos. Sometimes they duplicated efforts. Sometimes they competed for funding. But four days after the shooting, representatives from the city's existing LGBTQ service organizations huddled around the conference tables at the National Entrepreneur Center just a few miles from the nightclub to discuss how they could work together to help survivors, victims and their families.

"It sounds pretty simple. By the end of the day we had 18 organizations all committing to communicate and collaborate in a way they never had before," says Jennifer Foster, cofounder of the One Orlando Alliance, the committee formed from that meeting. "It was miraculous."



Orlando mayor Buddy Dyer, wearing a Joint T-shirt, after a press conference at Camping World Stadium, June 17, 2016. Photo by Joe Burbank/Orlando Sentinel/Getty Images

Today the One Orlando Alliance includes more than 30 community service providers attempting to address the needs of all who were affected that night. How do those who are not U.S. citizens get the mental healthcare they need? How does someone who works part time at a theme park pay rent while a loved one is in the hospital?

While everyone in the group is quick to admit they have a long way to go, they pride themselves on creating a more inclusive Orlando. "For a small city, for us to be figuring all of this out in the span of a year is a huge win," says Alliance cofounder Carlos Carbonell. City and county officials declared June 12, 2017, the one-year anniversary of the massacre, Orlando United Day, billing it as a "day of love and kindness." There were several dozen community service events going on throughout the city. Many companies gave employees the day off to help package meals for the hungry, host school supply drives and paint homes.

At the memorial, Sondra Valentino, AKA Sondra Rae, is broadcasting live for XL106.7. It's an emotional day, she says. She met her wife at Pulse six years ago over a few rounds of the club's famous Blue Long Island Iced Teas. For her and many others in Orlando, Pulse was a safe zone. It didn't matter whether you were gay or straight or figuring things out. You could go there and be yourself, she says.

"It was a place where anyone could go, feel welcomed and not care about anything outside the club's doors."

For now, those doors are locked. In some ways though, the safe zone Pulse represented has grown. Valentino sees it in the rainbow lights over State Road 408, the outpouring of support from local politicians and the notes she's received at the station since the attack. Patients write in to say they're more understanding of their gay son after seeing the community's response to Pulse. They thank her for always speaking so openly about her relationship with her wife. Valentino watches as two strangers embrace. "Before, Orlando was just a city," she says. "Now we are a family."



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