

The Gayborhood  
The Queer Public Podcast  
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Amber Hikes: The people of Philadelphia have been talking about issues around racism in the LGBTQ community for decades. It's been documented for God's sakes for over 30 years. Discriminatory practices in our bars so discriminatory dress code policies. White folks only having to show one form of I.D. where people of color ask for multiple forms and of course a lack of representation in our organizations and our leadership in our spaces. And unfortunately, those challenges persist.

Erin McGregor: Queer Public is a podcast about real-life queer life and, in each episode, asks a question about queer identity, queer politics, and our queer culture. Today we ask: how do we create queer spaces that affirm and center black and brown people of color? Today's episode is called The Gayborhood. I'm your host, Erin McGregor.

We're taking a walk through the streets between Chestnut and Pine, Broad and 11th. Through the gayborhood's nightclubs and parties and into City Hall. Philadelphia is one of three cities in the U.S. to have an LGBT affairs branch of the mayor's office. The other two are in Santa Clara, California and Union County, New Jersey mandated to address the issues facing local queer residents. I met up with our representative to the city Amber Hikes at Philadelphia's City Hall literally located in the city center. It overlooks Broad Street and running right through it is the Broad Street subway line which runs north and south underneath City Hall. You'll hear some of that subway noise throughout this story.

And that's the train that's going to go by every five minutes. Yeah. Yeah. I think. Oh God. Why did I not even think of that?

Amber Hikes: My name is Amber Hikes. I am the Executive Director of the Mayor's Office of LGBT affairs for the city of Philadelphia. I actually came to Philadelphia to go to grad school at Penn in 2006. I was fortunate to start kind of interning with the Attic Youth Center. So kind of during the day I was working with LGBTQ youth and then at night I was finding ways to organize with the Philadelphia Dyke March. Kind of finding community wherever I could. And right after I graduated from Penn I started an event production company called Stimulus Productions and we hosted nightlife events for queer folks in the city. We started out as kind of a lesbian nightlife production company but we were told pretty early on that, that terminology was exclusive for our trans siblings. So we broadened that and that company turns 10 this year.

Erin McGregor: Queer nightlife is often where queer community is the most visible and participated in. In Philly, the Gayborhood has often been criticized as a place comfortable to white community members, like myself, and where black and brown members have struggled to feel welcome or safe.

According to the 2016 U.S. Census, Philadelphia is 44% Black 14% Latino or Hispanic and 8% Asian. But if you walked through the Gayborhood and you'd never know that.

Amber Hikes: There was Sister's. The only lesbian bar at the time folks who identify as lesbian felt comfortable in that space. I can speak from my experience and the experiences of women of color who were in that space. There were just a lot of implicit and explicit signs that particular space wasn't really for them and certainly trans folks as well. A lot of that people pick up on that over the years.

Erin McGregor: It's in the details. Sister's wouldn't serve certain types of liquor or place certain types of music.

Amber Hikes: And so there was just this call to have something that was a space of our own. And so my business partner and I came together. She was a white woman from New Jersey with like a mohawk. And I was you know a black girl from Atlanta. I was living in Philadelphia for a few years with braids and we had no idea what we were doing. Neither one of us had ever thrown any nightlife events at all we just wanted to provide something else for the community. It really just came down to supply and demand. We joked about trying to get like 20 people to an event but 50 people showed up to the first one. 150 people showed up to the second one by the sixth month and we had 600 people that were coming consistently. And that continued for years.

Was at the very beginning of people using social media for pictures and promotion. So we were one of the first parties to have photographers. This was the party where you got dressed right you got your little outfit on you got your heels and for like black women they would you know straighten their hair they would press their hair because they were going to be photographed they were gonna be cute right but they weren't necessarily dancing their butts off they weren't sweating their hair out right they were there to be seen and when the parties got so large and became such a scene themselves we really longed for something that was like how we started. That felt more grassroots they felt more like a basement party they felt like something where you could come in sneakers and sweat your hair out. And so I created this party that's called back to basics and that's literally what it was just kind of a no-frills you know five bucks to get in, DJ's are

gonna keep it pumping, like kind of dimly lit. Maybe there's a photographer maybe there's not, but you're here just to have a really good time.

Erin McGregor: To understand why Amber needed to create new queer spaces we need to go back to Philly's original lesbian mainstay, Sister's.

Amber Hikes: Whatever you thought about Sister's right where there was a space you patronized or not it's really nice to have a space for folks. I mean it didn't serve a particular purpose for me but it did for a lot of folks. And so I think losing that space in the gayborhood was really tough for folks, especially at the time. People were really hoping that was going to remain a queer space.

Erin McGregor: Sister's was gay owned and lesbian run. So it was not immune to the phenomenon of dying lesbian bars like the Drugstore in Montreal and the Lexington and San Francisco, Sister's struggled. One day people showed up to signs on the door. Sister's was closed for business.

Amber Hikes: I was approached by some other folks that wanted to buy the space and they said you know we really want to do everything we can to make this remain a queer space and if possible space that's really safe for queer women, queer women and trans folks specifically. Do you want to go in on it? And I said Yeah I have no desire to own a bar or manage a bar but I've got some liquidity and I can help secure this for the community. I know a lot of ideas about the daily operations and in fact, I was the only business partner that was actually in nightlife at the time but the primary motivation was just to be able to hold a bar that was still hours in the community. This was at a time when we were just seeing a rapid gentrification in the gayborhood. And of course, that is continued and even quicker pace. But it was what felt like the beginnings of it at least for us.

So there were a handful of us. Everybody is identified as the queer woman or lesbian two of them were white women. One was a Latina woman. That we're going to buy this space had put in an offer. The offer was above asking. And it was an offer that was well above what the place was worth. Looks like the negotiations were going well. I was not a part of the first two walkthroughs. I showed up for the third walk-through because we are about to do this deal. Conversation went really well. You know we were talking to the owner about things we had in mind for the space. Now that was gonna go. Everything was great and friendly. We ended the meeting and I left the two white women stayed behind and they overheard the owner at the time saying you know I'm not going to sell this place to a colored person or I don't want this to turn into a colored

bar or something like that. The offer was rejected. It was then sold to someone else for well below what we were offering. And it is, it's our really great bar in the city but it is certainly not a queer bar.

I don't think I've ever really processed that, um hmm, I'm trying to remember the timeline of when I found out that that comment was said. I know it wasn't told immediately. I think my business partners they didn't want to traumatize me and if I can pull myself kind of out of that experience. So if I were somewhere and somebody said something to me or I overheard something that was transphobic about a person that I knew would I tell that person that people were saying things that were transphobic. I don't know, I would have to think about the purpose of saying that to tell someone that there were these things that are being said about them so I can understand the decision to not tell me because what benefit is that especially if we were gonna take over this space any way we were gonna make it. You know kind of progressive and radical and Queer as hell. Then why, why would someone tell me. But after we lost the deal I was made aware that they might have been part of why and it wasn't anything like me. This was the problem is that you were black you were discriminated against like we were discriminated against because of this. And that was the part that was devastating because again I didn't ever want to own a bar. That was the part that was hurtful and especially ones coming from inside of your community.

For white folks that know the story they look. Oh, God. You know I can imagine that so difficult it's like. Well, first of all, I'm a queer black woman who grew up in the American South. So let's be very clear this is not the first time anybody said anything problematic or it was even the most problematic thing that properly happened that week frankly. So we didn't it didn't really change my experience at all. it really just confirmed previous experiences that I had I will say someone saying something discriminatory or racist or biased to you is however a different experience than someone literally being able to block your access to a space especially when by the grace of God you have enough resources to be able to get that access in for someone to block that access just, based on who you are. That was different.

Erin McGregor: Flash forward a few years pass. Amber is working in nonprofit in Los Angeles. She and her business partner disband the Stimulus parties and they're looking to get out of nightlife. Amber is still keeping tabs on life in Philadelphia. She's back and forth a lot. And then in 2016, a video was leaked of a white bar owner talking about his black patrons. Trigger warning here. Amber is about to describe the racist content of the video. Skip ahead a couple seconds if you'd rather practice self-care.

Amber Hikes: So the video was released of the owner of iCandy using the N-word over and over again.

Erin McGregor: The video gets out and people are pissed. Protests break out outside the bar. The city doesn't know how to handle it. The office of LGBT affairs doesn't know how to handle it.

Amber Hikes: I got a call right after the new year in 2017 asking if I'd be interested in coming to run the Philadelphia office LGBT affairs and there was nothing that had prepared me for such an offer I had no idea. Something like that was coming. I obviously knew about the challenges that people were experiencing in the city I knew about the challenges that I had experienced in the city. And so I did come back and had a lot of thoughts around what we need to do to address this issue. As you can imagine, it's very difficult to accept a job where the top thing on your list is self racism.

That video that absolutely was kind of the smoking gun and it really confirmed with LGBTQ people of color been saying for a very long time. But you know how racism works in this country. Now white supremacy works like white folks have to see this. There's nothing under the N-word that a lot of white folks can see as actual discrimination or white supremacy. But this was that so fine and so folks all that and said OK well maybe there is a problem. But even some folks you know gaslight folks and so maybe it's not it's not a widespread problem is just a problem with this guy. Or he was upset at the time which was really which is really frustrating for so many of us. There was a lot that happened in the community. Boycotts, protests, community conversations hearings. There was leadership changes. I mean it was a time of tremendous unrest in the community and the iCandy video was is part of the narrative right. But it's not all of the narrative it's not even close to all of the narrative. These challenges have been highlighted protested for decades in this city. This was kind of the recent response to this very obvious blatant act of racism and discrimination but the community was just on fire and people were really in opposing corners. The biggest challenge is getting people into the room. People have been shouting at each other for so long on the Internet that they didn't even want to come from behind their computers or behind your picket lines and sit down and have a conversation about it.

I'll be clear it depends on the grievance right, it depends on the offense. If really sitting down and having a conversation is the best way to go. I don't believe that someone saying the N-word over and over again and laughing about it when talking about patrons is a person who has an implicit bias that can be talked about. That's a different thing. But there are degrees of racism decrees of white supremacy there's degrees of

prejudice and bias. And I do think by and large conversation is the way to go which is why we create a community conversation initiative. The whole idea was to get people kind of behind this computer screens and into the rooms with their fellow community members. But I think depending on what the offense is having conversations and especially if you're a person there holds a lot of privilege just listening to what folks who are more marginalized have to say. I do think that that's how we get things done. I say often they were talking specifically about white folks. They don't only benefit from racism but they just don't experience it. So it is often hard for them to understand what that looks like and what that feels like. Because it's not something they experience. But they're not willing to shut up and listen and believe people who tell you what their lived experiences think we can't dismantle it. I'm happy to say that a lot of those fires have been put out. I said before the community was on fire. It's smoldering now. We're always kind of ready for things to catch on fire again.

Erin McGregor: Eventually the owner of iCandy released an apology video and there was an initiative to bring business back to the bar but it was all too late. The community had spoken.

Amber Hikes: For me and I you know speak personally in this context and not as a government official and I think it's more of an individual decision what people do with their time with their money with their resources especially in a capitalist society. So the biggest challenge with forgiving the owner of iCandy or forgiving that space or continue to patronize that space is that it wasn't a rogue bartender. It wasn't a rogue bar back. It wasn't a racist manager. It was the owner. So anything you do in that space. Anything. That man profits off of. Right. And I would believe that if it were anybody else other than the owner and that it occurred that person probably would have been fired. People let their opinions be heard with her with their pocket with the resources. And I think that's how would you go in the person that is not particularly a capitalist person and remains a anticapitalist myself. But if there's something capitalism is good for it's that

Erin McGregor: In a capitalist society it can be really hard, but it's not impossible. We do have power. We can protest the things that are discriminatory and cause harm. We can also support the things that affirm marginalized voices. Some of those things are actions some are words and some are symbols

Amber Hikes: So it was an important time in history to mark something with a symbol and so I received a call from Tierney ad agency and a person as a friend, now Terry Kobach had me come down and said you know we think we have something that could help and we think it may kind of address some of the things you're talking about. And so

they have is really dope presentation and I sat there and they unveiled this flag. I cried. I teared up. I'm pretty open with the fact that I teared up. It was really transformative. It's such a simple design but it resonated. Like immediately. People need symbols. You could talk about this stuff to people in the face. But for a lot of folks. Symbols are what matters. It really helps kind of mobilize the message. Brought it back to the commission took it to the mayor obviously took its members of city council and folks were just through the roof. So the idea was to go ahead and raise it for pride and we did with a lot of fanfare and a lot of celebration. But we raised it on a Thursday and by Friday went national. Overwhelmingly the response was positive. People were thrilled to God. It's about time. Good gracious why did it take so long. Does this make sense? I didn't. I don't know why the sixth right rainbow flag didn't completely resonate with me but this, this feels like it reflects my experience this is something I can identify with. It's a beautiful blessing. I'm really excited about it.

Erin McGregor: The more color more pride flag has been adopted all over the world from the U.K. to Australia South Africa and a huge list of American cities. And in New York City, Lena Waithe even wore it as a cape on the red carpet at the Met Gala in 2018. The flag is everywhere.

Amber Hikes: But of course you know the way white supremacy works. We also had a fair amount of backlash as well. It created a conversation that is long overdue. And for that, I am profoundly grateful. But you know the backlash like it was personally hurtful. The death threats the slurs all of that was personally hurtful especially because it came from members of our own community.

Erin McGregor: So let's be honest about who has a problem with the more color more pride flag. It's members of the community who benefit the most from white supremacy from the whitewashing of queer movements. It's white members of the gay community who become enraged with the redesign and attack Amber with racial slurs and death threats. but people for whom the flag resonates are finding new ways to plant it. Spaces and attitudes are shifting and change is happening. The flag arrives at one of the most controversial spaces in The Gayborhood.

Amber Hikes: I think it's poetic right. As a former English major, I think you couldn't write. You couldn't write a more compelling kind of interesting story so iCandy was bought by the owner of Tabu and Tabu that space I think you can really ask anybody for talking about the Gayborhood there really isn't a better space for queer people of color for trans folks. For folks who exist on the margins. Yeah. Tabu was really that space. The Gayborhood has a profound amount of challenges for so many different

communities but Tabu is kind of if you were going to be in the gayborhood that was the space that people felt most comfortable in at least all those different identities felt most comfortable in. And so it is frankly poetic that, that bar is the bar that bought this old iCandy Space and has been able to bring that kind of inclusive progressive energy into a space that really caused so much trauma and pain to so many members of our community. I now host events that are in that space because I was hosting obviously events in the old Tabu and we sage that space pretty regularly. Whatever we get an opportunity to. What's also very cool about this space is that the first floor has the More Color More Pride flag on the wall. It's a brilliant and symbolic reminder of how far we've come and where we're going. Really um especially when you think about the you know the bit of backlash we got for the flag for a place like Tabu to say not only are we going to fight outside which they also do that but we are going to paint this wall in this color to be very clear and intentional as soon as you get in the door about what we stand for and who were in solidarity with. There's something that's really remarkable and beautiful about that.

Erin McGregor: A lot of work goes into building queer spaces that affirm the identities of the most marginalized people in the community and that work is hard and thankless. When we are able, supporting those spaces by attending events showing up and even just talking to each other is how to keep those spaces sacred. And if you're a person who holds a lot of privilege ask spaces who CAN do better, to do better.

This episode was produced by me, Erin McGregor. Editing and sound design by Ariana Martinez. Music Supervision by Homoground host and creator Lynn Casper. We heard music from SuperKnova, Elle de luna, and Philly's own Shi De Buzzard. Special thanks to our editorial board Cin Pim who gave us great feedback about how to make this episode better, and to the Office of LGBTQ Affairs in Philadelphia.

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Next time on Queer Public:

Rachel Wallace-MacDonald: I always felt like a lesbian but knew that I was not a lesbian. Like I remember being really young and reading like Alison Bechdel's stuff, and I was like this is my world. Like I found a complete collection of Dykes to Watch Out For and I read the entire thing and I was like holy shit, this is where I belong. And so it's funny to me now that I live in like West Philly and I have hairy armpits and I'm a professional cuddlist and like there's communal houses and I'm like oh my god this is where I thought I should be. And here I am except I'm not a dyke to watch out for.

I'm your host, Erin McGregor. Thanks for listening.