

ACTIVISM

In a State Hostile to LGBTQ+ People, Arkansas' First Transgender Center Is a Lifeline

"Not everyone has a home to go to and have a meal or a place to hang out. We are that place."



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Courtesy of Intransitive

Every news cycle becomes heavier, like a fog of uncertainty that thickens and makes it impossible to see what lies ahead. Since the beginning of this year, queer and trans rights have been rolled back on almost every front, from bans on gender-affirming care for youth to the ensorship of books featuring gay characters. The ramifications of these laws, including an increase in acts of harassment, vandalism, and assault, have already been felt. In the midst of such inequity, it can be difficult to believe that a different world remains possible.

And yet, around the country, there are organizations both small and large that are doing the daily work to ensure our communities thrive. They reveal that there is power that emerges from necessity and demonstrate the universal impulse toward transformation: to create something that has not previously existed, and change the world in the process.

An example of such transformation has recently unfurled on a quiet street in Little Rock, Arkansas. There, a small organization named Intransitive has alchemized attacks on queer and trans life into a site of collective political power, including building Arkansas' first-ever Transgender Community Center. Their story provides insights into how we can survive this moment, and perhaps even build power for the future.

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The Transgender Community Center grew against seemingly insurmountable odds. In 2021, Intransitive's focus was on recruiting new members to build a progressive political base in Arkansas. However, when Republicans in the state legislature introduced the country's first-ever ban on gender-affirming care that year, it was clear their focus would need to pivot.

They started to create colorful social media graphics about how to contact state senators and protest the ban, both within and outside the state. As news of the ban gained attention around the country, Intransitive was flooded with donations from supporters, who understood via social media and word of mouth that the organization was on the front lines of ensuring trans people in Arkansas received the care they needed.

This influx of funds made questions about where the money should go essential. After years of organizing in parking lots (or "really anywhere we could find," as Rumba Yambú, Intransitive's Director, puts it with a laugh), a space of their own was a dream. They wondered what it would mean to build power for their community in the future.

"We knew that this moment would pass, but investing in a space would help sustain us in a truly long term way," Yambú says. A community center would ensure that no matter what the future wrought, they would have a space to gather, celebrate, and resist.

So, in the spring of 2021, they purchased a building and set out to work. Volunteers from social media and their organizing community spent 12-hour days tearing out the floors, opening up the walls, and installing electricity. The building had been abandoned for almost a year, which meant that everything had to be repaired from the ground up. After months of painting and hammering, the current center came into focus: a salon to practice make-up, space for skill-sharing workshops, and an office. In recent months, they have even opened a “banned book library” that features titles removed from Arkansas’ public libraries.

“Not everyone has a home to go to and have a meal or a place to hang out. We are that place,” says Jack Walnut.

The Center is one of a handful of physical spaces dedicated specifically to trans organizing in America; for Arkansas’ trans community, it is a haven in the middle of the deep-red state. The space has hosted everything from love-letter writing workshops for trans youth to makeup classes and soap making workshops. By several measures, it is an oasis: “The kitchen is blue, the art room is white, and the salon is pink,” says Jack Walnut, an organizer with Intransitive, referencing the colors of the trans pride flag.

“I believe trans-centered spaces are important because not everyone has a safe space, especially in the world we are living in right now,” Walnut continues. “Not everyone has a home to go to and have a meal or a place to hang out. We are that place.”

In addition to these workshops, the center has become a magnet for political organizing. Yambú says the space is particularly important for young organizers and people meeting at the intersection of issue areas — such as abortion and access to gender-affirming care — who might not otherwise have a safe and secure place to come together in the state.

Courtesy of Intransitive

One of the most impactful of these meetings took place last year, when Intransitive hosted lawyers from the ACLU in town to litigate the state's ban on gender-affirming care. On the night the ACLU rested their case, "we went to the Intransitive space, had pizza and gave remarks," says Chase Strangio, the director for transgender justice with the ACLU's LGBT & HIV Project, who was the lead attorney on the case.

"It was so beautiful and so important," Strangio recalls. "When you're fighting back against this type of government repression and the stakes are so high, you really do need a community to lift you up, you need to have that infrastructure of collective care, and that has always been present through Intransitive and their partner organizations."

As Strangio points out, the Transgender Community Center is one star in a constellation of contemporary and historic trans-led spaces that have developed to care for trans and queer people in response to government abuse and neglect. He points to STAR House, a 4-bedroom apartment in the East Village of New York City, formed by Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson to house trans youth. Like Intransitive, Rivera and Johnson repaired the apartment themselves, fixing up ceilings and painting walls. In recent years, spaces such as G.L.I.T.S. House in New York City and House of GG in Little Rock have taken on this historical mantle, providing sanctuary for trans youth and adults alike.

In Arkansas, this approach — creating your own spaces while simultaneously challenging government violence — has been successful. Earlier this year, after Intransitive rallied dozens

of people to testify against a bill that would have criminalized trans adults for using the bathroom that aligned with their gender identity, the legislation was rewritten.

As for the state's gender-affirming care ban, a judge ruled in favor of the ACLU in June and determined that the law was unconstitutional. The ruling has galvanized activists, who hope the case will set a precedent around the country and lead to the downfall of other bans on gender-affirming care, which have passed in over a dozen states.

Despite these wins, Yambú says the past three years have come at a cost. "I feel like something was taken from me, but we can't keep losing people to burnout. Joy is our protective gear," they note. That commitment to joy is perhaps the greatest lesson the Transgender Community Center can offer young activists fighting to protect queer and trans people in the face of escalating government violence.



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On a spring day earlier this year, the necessity of joy was on full display. Intransitive was celebrating its six-year anniversary, which meant a large, rainbow-colored cake topped with the letter "six" and two bounce houses where children and adults alike felt their knees wobble

with laughter. "People kept coming up to us and saying that they had never experienced something like it before," says Yambú.

It was a rare moment in a state and country where such moments are increasingly rare. "I don't want anyone to lose sight of how incredible it is to reject and move beyond the set of limitations that systems of power have imposed upon you," says Strangio, "to demand something better, greater, and more expansive than what other people can imagine."

Part of that imagination requires us to remember that no matter what the present moment yields, our greatest resource is always one another. Whether resisting in a bouncy house or the courtroom, our lives are not dictated by external structures. As the Transgender Community Center represents, we must remember to paint, hammer, build, and exist within our own.

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