

SOUTH JERSEY

# 'We're still here': LGBTQ+ seniors reflect on what pride means to them



**Kaitlyn McCormick**

Cherry Hill Courier-Post

Mitch Augarten didn't, and still doesn't, view being gay as his lead quality.

In fact, Augarten had little interest in hanging out with other people just because they were also gay and old. So, when his husband joined an LGBTQ+ senior support group six years ago, Augarten said he'd rather stay home.

But his disinterest didn't last long.

Now, the 69-year-old said he feels like more of an activist than he ever has.

"Augarten, his husband Don Levitsky and the other seven original members of Aging with Pride, a Cherry Hill-based support group for LGBTQ+ seniors, were alive during the Stonewall Riots in 1969 that catapulted gay rights activism into the forefront of history and during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s.

They were alive when gay marriage wasn't legal, before the first pride flag flew and when dates were arranged through personal ads in newspapers and magazines.

Now, they're reflecting on what they can teach the younger generations of gay people that are able to walk through doors previously pried open, as well as recognizing things they may still have to learn about what being gay means in 2024.



Mitch Augarten (left) and husband Don Levitsky (right) members of Cherry Hill's Aging with Pride LGBTQ+ senior support group  
(provided by Mitch Augarten)

## Teaching and learning

Though not a member of the gay community herself, Reva Farenback-Brateman started Aging with Pride in 2018 after noticing support groups available for gay teens and young adults at the Samost Jewish Family & Children's Service of Southern New Jersey and thinking, "Well, what about my age group?"

The 73-year-old thought the group would run for six months when she pitched it to her supervisor and planned its sessions accordingly.

At the very first meeting, she said, the seniors requested earlier meetings that weren't past their bedtime and declined the sweets she'd brought because they were watching their figures.

Six years later, Aging with Pride is still kicking, and 111 different members have attended sessions at one point or another. They meet during the day now, and Farenback-Brateman still brings them nice desserts, "and they gobble them up."

Much of the group's sessions revolve around education, especially keeping the seniors informed on what is happening within the community, like a stronger focus on pronouns, trans issues and new terminologies.

Members of Aging with Pride complimented Farenback-Brateman for the effort that goes into finding speakers and developing programming for each meeting.

"They're fun, they're interested, they're learning, they're growing" she said. "It's one of the joys of my life."

At the same time, the seniors encourage younger generations to be true to themselves and their identities — and to learn about the struggles and triumphs of past generations.

"Learn the history of the gay world because it will make you appreciate what you have and make sure you keep it," Levitsky said.



Community members come together for Haddon Township's fourth annual Pride Parade on June 6, 2024

Kaitlyn McCormick/ The Courier Post



Don Cook, Dave Phillips and Lary Campbell at Haddon Township's Pride Community Night on June 7.

Kaitlyn McCormick/The Courier-Post

## 'We're still here'

When Augarten came out in his early 30s, Levitsky was his first gay relationship. The pair reside in Cherry Hill, though they're planning to move soon, much to the dismay of their neighbors.

Levitsky said that he was "never in [the closet]." After his parents sent him to a psychologist in 1963, they got a letter back that read, "Don is a homosexual. He's okay with it."

Lary Campbell, 68, of Magnolia came out in the '70s during the post-Stonewall era and participated in a lot of activism within New York City's gay community; "It was not a parade then, it was a march, because we were angry," he said through a quiet laugh.

Sherry Eason, 73, always knew she'd loved women, even after getting pregnant and marrying her husband and best friend, who she said knew she was gay.

Don Cook, 75, was out in college, "sort of, not really" and was briefly engaged to a woman.

Dave Phillips had known he was gay since the early '60s. But it wasn't until three or four years ago that the 76-year-old came out publicly.

"Don't be afraid like I was for a lot of years in my life," he said. "Be proud of it. I finally am after all these years."

"What an older gay community can offer the younger is resilience," Campbell said.

Sure, this group is tied together by their age, but their stories aren't identical.

What they really want people to know is that they're still here. And they always have been.

*Kaitlyn McCormick writes about trending issues and community news across South Jersey for the Courier-Post, The Daily Journal and the Burlington County Times. If you have a story she should tell, email her at [kmccormick@gannett.com](mailto:kmccormick@gannett.com). And subscribe to stay up to date on the news you need.*

