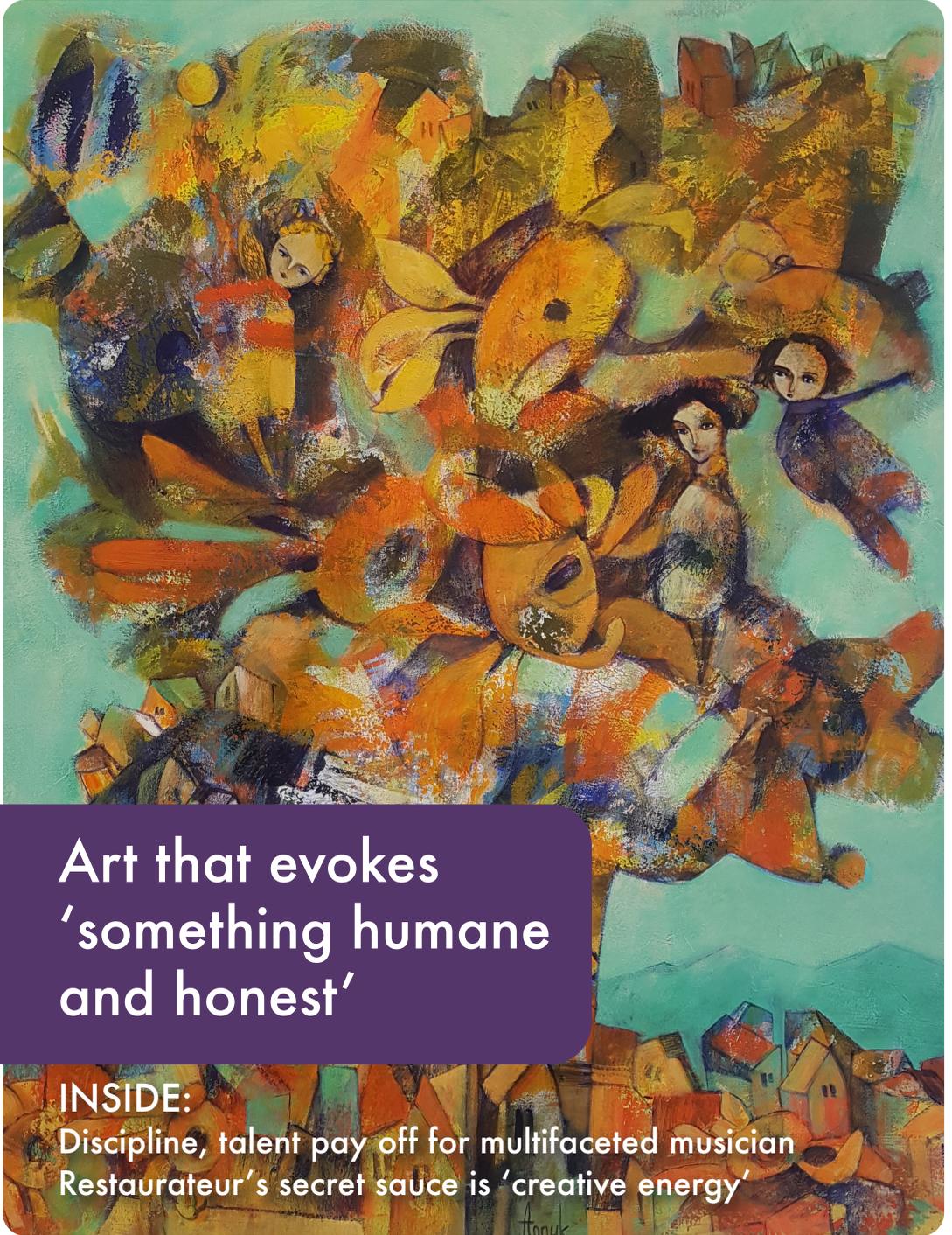




Celebrating Food, Art & Culture



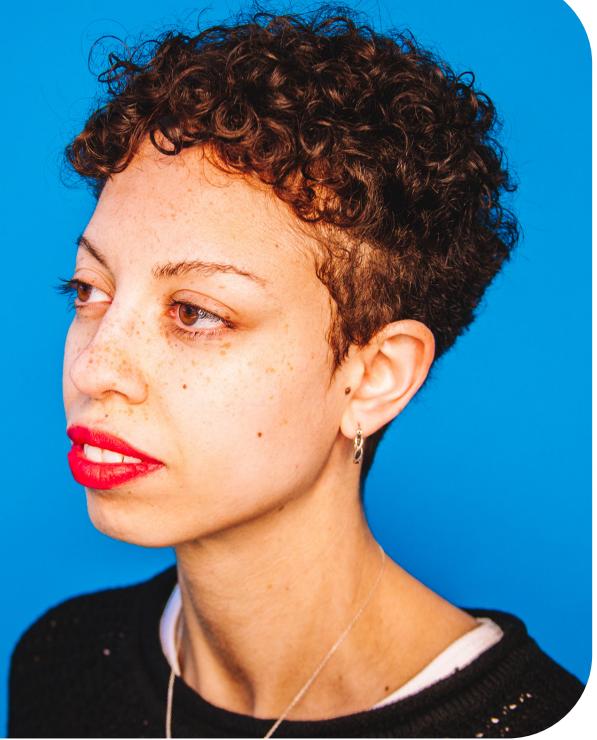
Art that evokes
'something humane
and honest'

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Discipline and talent pay off for multifaceted musician

Krysta Rayford's accomplishments include becoming a voting member of the Recording Academy, presenter of the Grammy Awards. Photo by N. Musinguzi



As an 8-year-old, Krysta Rayford wanted to be a pro basketball player for the WNBA's Minnesota Lynx. She pursued high school tennis and basketball, but arm and knee injuries sidelined her pro sports plan.

She also grew up loving music but felt so anxious performing she once took refuge behind a prop on stage during a school play. Eventually her love of music won out, and today the LGBT electronic musician has discovered that those early lessons in discipline are paying off in her music career.

Known professionally as K. Raydio, Rayford started working professionally in music in 2010 as a singer-songwriter. Musicians hired her to write "hooks," or song choruses, and now she is also a producer, vocalist, voiceover talent and educator. She is a member of the Recording Academy and in late 2021 cast her first vote in the Grammy Awards.

The self-taught musician has provided voiceovers for "Empire" (FOX), "Independent Lens" (PBS), "Barbie's Dreamhouse Adventures" (Netflix) and "Around the Way" (Hulu).

Today, the Minneapolis musician spends time every day creating music, whether she is writing songs and lyrics for "Farewell, Nostalgia," her fourth album, or teaching electronic music to the next generation of

artists. Her MPK225 electronic keyboard is never far from her side, just as a tennis racket was a constant companion when she once played the sport six days a week.

She mused recently about the effect discipline from sports participation has had on her.

"When you're a kid, you have that routine. As you become an adult, you realize ... that routine was actually really great," she says. "I think in order to not burn the candle at both ends, there has to be a sense of balance and discipline, and routine has definitely got me there. My brother and I just talked about this last week, the discipline. I think the mental stamina that we've built as youth athletes has definitely helped me as a professional musician."

Krysta Rayford

Hometown: Born in Evanston, Illinois; raised in Minneapolis

Family/partner: KaMia, partner of 10 years; parents and younger brother

Discover her music on:
kraydio.bandcamp.com

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Hairstylist finds ways to bring others joy



In addition to styling hair, Dean Hill paints and does polymer-clay crafting. Photo by Richard Israel

Sometimes it's a four-leaf clover. Other times, Dean Hill leaves small, handmade pieces of art on his coworkers' desks. They've even been known to leave little surprises for cashiers at Trader Joe's and other retailers across Charlotte, North Carolina.

Hill loves to make people feel good.

As a hairstylist at the Midtown Charlotte location of Bishops, a minority-owned and women LGBTQIA+-led and staffed salon, Hill, cuts and colors his way to clients' smiles every day.

Born in Winston-Salem, Hill has lived in Charlotte for most of their life. And hair has been a part of Hill's identity for a long time. "I used to do hair in the bathroom for my friends in high school," they say. "I started doing it for myself, because I couldn't find anyone to do my hair the way I liked it."

But one man taught Hill many of the techniques they still use today. "During high school, I started thinking, 'What am I going to do with my life?'" Hill says. "I called my mom's hairstylist, and he said, 'If you like doing hair, you should make a career out of it and go to hair school.'"

Hill enrolled at Paul Mitchell The School Charlotte, and graduated in 2017. After taking a break for a few months, they landed a gig at Great Clips, churning out dozens of cuts a day. But rather than a focus on efficiency cuts, Hill was in search of something a little slower, more intentional.

A roommate who worked next door to Bishops at a pizza place suggested they check it out.

"I looked up the brand, and they were gender-neutral and trans-inclusive, and they are also out in the community doing things with the shop," Hill says. "I walked in and was like, 'Are you hiring?'"

Two-and-a-half years later, Hill still finds it a good fit. "I don't feel like I have to make myself palatable for others," they note. "Salons are into self-expression, but even then, standards of professionalism don't include being able to be androgynous."

Outside of the salon, Hill loves art, including painting and polymer-clay crafting. "I give it as a gift, or leave it on someone's desk," they say.

"I originally started with four-leaf clovers. I find them everywhere, all the time. ..."

In the community, Hill is active with Transcend, a Charlotte-based support group for trans adults 18 and up and partners of trans people. "I've been trans for a decade," they say.

"I am able to be out as nonbinary to everyone in my life," Hill says. "That's not a privilege a lot of nonbinary people are afforded, and it's really neat to be able to live like that, to show people that you can live like that."

Words Hill lives by? "It's just about surrounding yourself with people who like you for who you are, and not for the idea of you that they have in their head," Hill says.

"It's just about surrounding yourself with people who like you for who you are, and not for the idea of you that they have in their head."

– Dean Hill

Art that evokes 'something humane and honest'

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The artists featured in this Pride edition of *Unity* exemplify the human spirit of artistry, and their commitment to proudly represent the LGBTQ+ community.



"Window to My Soul"
by Karen Y. Buster



"Uninhibited"
by Karen Y. Buster

KAREN Y. BUSTER

Karen Y. Buster was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, in a household of creative people and energy. Her mother, a designer, two sisters – one a dancer and the other a poet – and her brother, an artist as well, all served as positive sources for her artwork. As a child, Buster was fascinated with strips of photography film negatives. She attributes that fascination and dreaming in black and white as stimuli for her signature black and white X-Acto knife cutouts.

Buster studied and graduated from Dillard University in New Orleans with a degree in business administration and marketing.

Buster encourages her viewer to follow the geometrical shapes and patterns of her artwork. "Allow your eye to travel," she says. "Look at the sharp edges drawn by a precision knife which speaks to the development of my style." The audience is invited to follow those shapes and patterns in "Window to My Soul," where they are also invited to investigate the depths of the subject's eyes.

Joy and freedom are portrayed in Buster's piece "Uninhibited." It is



"I Am Woman"
by Karen Y. Buster

a piece Buster created after she experienced a heart attack at the young age of 38. "It states that nothing can stop me if I remain spiritually sound and strong," she says of the exuberant piece.

"I Am Woman," says Buster, "speaks to the power of my voice as it clarifies who I am." Although in black and white, the vibrancy of African prints is brilliantly showcased, and the depiction of solidarity and strength can definitely be "seen" in this piece.

"My work has been described as irregular, eccentric, different, unusual and unconventional," Buster says. "I will continue to look at everyday images in this unorthodox way."

Buster's artwork has been featured on movie sets including "Coming 2 America" and "Halloween Kills."



"Fruitfulness" by Anna Annuk Soghomonyan

ANNA ANNUK SOGHOMONYAN

Anna Annuk Soghomonyan is a native of Yerevan, Armenia. She earned a master's degree in psychology from Yerevan Brusov State University of Languages and Social Sciences, and later graduated from the Yerevan State Academy of Fine Arts with a master's degree in fine arts.

As a mixed-media artist, much of Annuk's work reflects her understanding of human psychology as she searches for a deeper meaning of life and nature. It is Annuk's goal to foster emotional responses from viewers of all ages.



"Tree of Life" and "Sleeping awake," by Anna Annuk Soghomonyan

Annuk's artwork featured in this publication are acrylic on large, stretched canvas with many layers of color and deep dense textures. "Fruitfulness" is one in Annuk's Red Spot series. The luminous color of red in the fruit and tabletop come alive as does the stark white fruit against a slight sepia tone.

"Tree of Life," on the cover, is often described as "fantasy artwork" – a genre that depicts magical or supernatural themes and ideas. "I was just painting sunflowers when all of a sudden, friends were invited to join," says Annuk of this piece. Carefully observed, some of its figures appear mystical as it represents a strong sense of people and community.

Annuk's work also displays elements of surrealism and modern expressionism. "'Sleeping awake,'" says Annuk, "is a semi-abstract still-life in symbolic and surrealism style." She describes this piece as a modern philosophical work. "This painting is about our ability of seeing signs of the universe," she declares.

Annuk's paintings have been presented at galleries throughout Asia, Europe and U.S.

KHALIF THOMPSON

Khalif Thompson was born and raised in the Canarsie neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. In his artistic family of five children, Thompson remembers his mother and father nurturing the creative spirit of all six siblings. Thompson's two older brothers attended

Brooklyn High School of the Arts majoring in fine arts. Thompson's sisters were involved in performing arts and creative writing.

Thompson's love for art continued with a bachelor of fine art in painting and drawing from Purchase College, State University of New York.

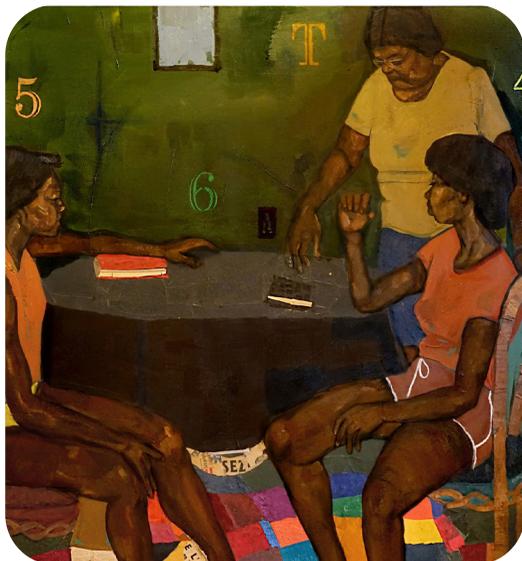
Thompson's life experiences evoke the sense of community in



"Lady Geneva and Aunt Donella" by Khalif Thompson

his work. "Focusing on portraiture and figuration," Thompson says, "my subjects include family, friends and cultural figures placed in constructing settings."

"Lady Geneva and Aunt Donella" is rendered in oil paint, mixed media, collage and handmade paper on canvas.

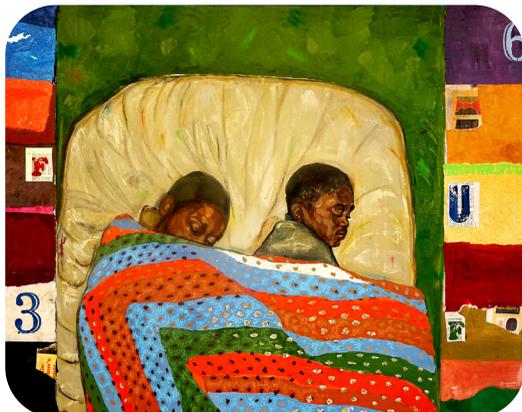


"The Basement" by Khalif Thompson

"The Basement" depicts a strong relationship between a younger and older generation that is commonplace in the Black community.

Snuggled up under a cozy brightly colored comforter, tenderness and warmth exude from an aerial point of view in "Butterflies and Snakes." One can only imagine if the young boys are dreaming about its title.

"I want to see my work touch people deeply and have them experience something humane and honest – compelling individuals to investigate themselves and their own unique identity," says Thompson. "In all, my work is a pure and consummate search for who I am and an eloquent practice of telling my story."



"Butterflies and Snakes" by Khalif Thompson

Restaurateur's secret sauce is 'creative energy'



After a year in business, Brennah Lambert hopes to open a second café in New Jersey. Photo courtesy of Brennah Lambert

Brennah Lambert didn't grow up dreaming of becoming a chef.

"When I was younger, I would just tell my mom that I didn't want to have a boss," she says, explaining her career goals revolved more around independence than a specific passion. She later attended college to pursue a degree in business but didn't know what industry she wanted to pursue.

After going vegan and gluten-free for health reasons, she learned to cook out of necessity. "You're forced to cook for yourself a lot of the time," she says, because there aren't a lot of takeout options that meet both dietary restrictions, and family members don't necessarily know what to offer either. "That forced me to learn new things and experiment."

She turned to Instagram for inspiration, developing versions of her favorite dishes and comfort foods by watching how others incorporated produce as an alternative to meat and dairy. She reimagined recipes to add her own flair and developed versions of her favorite comfort foods in a way that avoids highly processed alternatives. "I started to expand my knowledge," she says, "which helped me use food as a creative outlet."

Lambert often gets "hyperfocused" and "obsessed" with her creative interests – which range from writing poetry to learning music, exploring art and tattoos, and other pursuits outside the kitchen. "Creative energy is always flowing," she says. The salesman who sold her a bass guitar – her most recent venture

– actually eats at her restaurant, *Lesbiveggies*, which she opened in February 2021 in Audubon, New Jersey. The cafe has thrived during the pandemic partially because of the high demand for vegan, allergy-friendly food.

The restaurant's name, which alludes to Lambert's queer identity and vegan lifestyle, actually started on social media, too. It was an Instagram handle where she posted food photos as a hobby while she was learning to cook new dishes. A small-business adviser – worried she might become a target or turn away customers – cautioned her from using it as the face of her business, but she felt strongly about the brand. "That was the identity at that point," she says.

The idea for her cafe started when an acquaintance asked for help transitioning to a vegan diet. Lambert first launched a meal-prepping service and quickly needed to keep up with customers who ordered six different recipes every week. The restaurant is now open on Sundays and Tuesdays through Saturdays. Shifting to a storefront brought new challenges — like figuring out how to size and order an industrial vent hood for the stove and tweaking her process to improve efficiency without sacrificing quality.

"I started out with no kitchen experience, never even worked in a kitchen or seen what it's like back there. So initially, when we first started, it was sloppy." For instance, she would cook spaghetti from scratch every time it was ordered, "wasting time making the same things every day" and creating longer waits for customers. The cafe staffs eight people, including Lambert, seating 22 customers and preparing food for takeout.

Lambert describes her menu as "just an extension of foods I personally like," which includes influences from various cuisines. "I'm interested in different cultures," she adds, which is evident in diverse options, like coconut curry noodles, birria tacos and eggplant parm. She enjoys working with versatile ingredients like cauliflower, offering the vegetable prepared three ways: blackened with Cajun spices for a salad or sandwich, or as a replacement for wings, either smothered in barbecue sauce or a chipotle-lime seasoning.

"The thing I'm most proud of is that I actually pulled it all together," Lambert says, reflecting on how much she's grown over the past year. "I had no idea how to run a business, how to employ people."

Now that she understands the industry better, she envisions expanding to add a second location. But until she's ready, she'll spend her downtime vibing to the crisp, low tones of her bass guitar.

Discipline and talent pay off for multifaceted musician

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Rayford realized during the pandemic she needed to apply the same discipline she had in sports to her music creation. "It's a different craft, but applying those same lessons of discipline, you need it. You definitely need it."

Rayford grew up adoring music. At home, the family soaked in the folksy notes of Joni Mitchell and James Taylor, the Southern soul music of Stax Records, and Motown's rhythm and blues.

"I grew up in this very eclectic household where music was always playing on the stereo or the turntables," she says. "That truly influenced me. I was a very shy kid, and I wanted to pursue music, but I had such debilitating anxiety that it (performing) became a personal goal."

Upon graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, she promised herself to pursue a music career, even though she had a communication arts degree.

"So I recorded a demo with a good friend of mine ... and I just put the EP out," she says. People told her, "Oh, we didn't know that this was brewing in your mind for 21 years." But it was. "Music has been a very personal extension of my upbringing, and my childhood goals and dreams, too."

Like many professional musicians, Rayford has her own "day job." She is an instructor and artist-in-residence at Minneapolis' MacPhail Center for Music, teaching in the Electronic Music Recording Arts Program. "That's been really exciting for me, especially since being a woman producer and being a Black woman producer, there's so little representation with women producers, especially in electronic music. So it's a really cool way for me to combine teaching, music education, music history and my passions all in a really cool way."

Her earliest memory of performing was during first grade for a school production called "Salute to Disney." Little Krysta was supposed to sing a solo of "Whistle While You Work" from "Snow White," but performance anxiety took over.

"I come out on stage and I freeze up and there's a giant prop tree. And so I sat behind the tree and the pianist just kind of played through my part."



A former athlete, Krysta Rayford has evolved into a sought-after producer, songwriter, vocalist, voiceover talent and educator. Photo by Andy Witchger

After the first act, Rayford's desire to perform won out. "I was like, 'OK, stage fright is gone. I'm enjoying this.' But it took a good hour of the show for me to feel comfortable.

"Even now when I perform I get so ready to just bolt right before I go on stage. But it's an adrenaline rush. I think that inner child is still there with me. I just kind of calm her down before I step out.

"I don't hide behind the prop tree anymore."

"I grew up in this very eclectic household where music was always playing on the stereo or the turntables. That truly influenced me. I was a very shy kid, and I wanted to pursue music, but I had such debilitating anxiety that it (performing) became a personal goal."
– Krysta Rayford

National nonprofit supports the LGBTQ+ community



PFLAG members march at the 2018 Toronto pride parade. Photo by Shawn Goldberg / Shutterstock.com

Jeanne Manford founded PFLAG, a nonprofit organization supporting LGBTQ+ issues, after marching with her son in the Christopher Street Liberation Day March in New York City. She made her own sign that said, “Parents of gays unite in support for our children.”

“That was the genesis of PFLAG,” says Jean-Marie Navetta, director of learning and inclusion at PFLAG National in Washington, D.C.

Fifty years later, PFLAG has nearly 400 chapters in the United States, with at least one in every state. It has the distinction of being the first and largest organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) people, their parents, families and allies.

PFLAG’s mission is to achieve full equality and inclusion by providing support, education and advocacy. PFLAG works on the national level to

influence laws and policies. “Even as laws and policies change,” Navetta says, “it doesn’t mean full acceptance for them exists. That’s where PFLAG does a lot of its long-term work: culture change.”

Chapters like PFLAG in Charlotte, North Carolina, further the mission on the local level with in-person and virtual support groups for parents and allies with an LGBTQ+ family member or friend. Anyone can attend a meeting, including first-timers. “We set the stage to say, ‘This is a safe space where you can come and listen, if that’s all you need to do, for the first meeting or you can share your story or ask the questions you need to ask,’” says Karen Graci, PFLAG Charlotte’s executive director.

A PFLAG parent and a mental health provider host “Navigating Your Journey” quarterly, a two-hour education program. “This is for parents and caregivers who may have a loved one who has recently come out,” Graci says.

PFLAG Charlotte also conducts educational programs for health professionals, companies, schools and churches. Last year, more than 1,800 professionals and individuals attended a session. “We can bring that conversation to people looking for that education and information,” Graci says.

Members of the Los Angeles chapter of PFLAG started PFLAG en Español, a satellite group, for Spanish-speaking people. Two-hour meetings are held, in Spanish, four times a month on Zoom. As the COVID-19 pandemic eases, in-person meetings will return.

“We introduce ourselves and we just talk about our lives,” says Gizella Czene, a PFLAG Los Angeles board of director member. “We talk about what it’s like to have a child or someone in the LGBTQ+ community. Most of the time, you’ll find we’re just like everyone else. We worry about the normal things: relationships, jobs, mental health and our families.”

When a new person joins a meeting, says Czene, others in the group tell their coming out (share sexual orientation or gender identity openly) story to put the newcomers at ease. They see they’re not alone. “When the kids come out of the closet, parents go into the closet,” Czene says. “Our support groups are all about getting parents to come out of the closet.”