*Hear, Here* Field Trip: LGBTQ+LAX Tour

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**Directions/Instructions:**

Before starting the tour enter the Hear, Here number into your phone’s contacts:

1-844-432-7529.

You will be visiting three *Hear, Here* signs, starting and ending at Riverside Park in downtown La Crosse. Your route is as follows:

* Your first sign is in Riverside Park. Follow the walkway along the river towards the Hiawatha Statue until you find your first *Hear, Here* sign by narrator **Siiri Koski**. The *Hear, Here* sign with her story will be labeled with **Location #6, Story #8**. Call the *Hear, Here* number at 1-844-432-7529, and enter the location and story number to listen to Siiri’s story.
* From Riverside Park, head to State Street where you will walk away from the river, staying on State Street, until you come to the intersection of State and 4th Street. Take a right onto 4th Street, and follow until you find **Deaf Ear Records at 112 4th Street South** on the west of the road. Your second story is by **Mary O’Sullivan**, and is **Location #4, Story #4** in the phone system. There is a parking lot to stand in near the sign.
* Your third and final story is by **Will Van Roosenbeek, at Location #3, Story #7**. The story is located at the former Rainbow Revolution Bookstore, which is now a furniture store next to Mueller’s Photography. You may choose to stand across the street in the area by El Rodeo Restaurant (The Scenic Center building) when you call to listen to the *Hear, Here* sign, as there is more room for a large group. You can see El Rodeo Restaurant in the Scenic Center from Will Van Roosenbeek’s *Hear, Here* sign as it is across the road.
* To get back to Riverside Park after your last sign, continue walking north on 5th Ave South until State Street. Turn left on State Street and continue until Riverside Park.



Story #3: Will Van Roosenbeek

Story #2: Mary O’Sullivan

Story #1: Siiri Koski

**Introduction**:

The history of the LGBTQ+ community in La Crosse is becoming more visible through the *Hear, Here* project. This tour, called LGBTQ+LAX, highlights three stories of LGBTQ+ spaces in our community. These stories span decades, recounting the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals from the 1980s to the 2010s, and touches on issues of identity, belonging to community, and the necessity of safe spaces. These issues remain central to the LGBTQ+ community, but the discourse and community perceptions surrounding these issues have progressed through time. This tour starts with a look at present-day Pride in the Park by recounting Siiri Koski’s experience as an attendee. Diving into the question of how La Crosse came to celebrate Pride with an out and visible LGBTQ+ community, the tour will focus on a story from the 1980s from Mary O’Sullivan about the lesbian community in La Crosse buying tuxedos, and then a story from Will Van Roosenbeek about finding a welcoming space at the Rainbow Revolution Bookstore. This tour fixates on the importance of creating physical spaces in a community, like bookstores, parks, and parties, for people of all identities.

Historians trace the rise of gay and lesbian identities and communities in the United States to industrialization and urbanization in the late nineteenth century.[[1]](#footnote-1) By the mid-1950s, gay and lesbian organizations were publishing periodicals. Activist groups pursued public support for lesbian and gay rights and advocated for the understanding of the community as an oppressed minority rather than a criminal class. Furthermore, the 1960s saw the sexual revolution and the liberation of women. A new generation had radical ideas about gender expression and advocated for more freedom of self-expression. The LGBTQ+ community found its national voice through civil disobedience such as the Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969 which expressed anger about discrimination in public spaces and police harassment. The Stonewall Riots were six days of protests by members of the LGBTQ+ community in New York City after police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay club. The Stonewall Riots are considered the catalyst for the gay rights or gay liberation movement in the United States. The movement produced social and political discussion concerning the visibility, discrimination, and harassment of those who identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community. The same ideologies that rose from the gay liberation movement resonated and continue to resonate, here in La Crosse.

The primary goal of the early LGBTQ+ community in La Crosse was to create and foster comfortable spaces for members of the community. There were a variety of businesses, libraries, and gatherings that promoted the growth of a culture. The city’s rich bar culture and a sense of tolerance aided the emergence of an out gay culture in the 1970s.[[2]](#footnote-2) Businesses, organizations, and festivals that are LGBTQ+ friendly continue to flourish in La Crosse, most of which are located downtown.[[3]](#footnote-3) The 7 Rivers LGBTQ Connection (The Center) was established in 2004, and is an organization that has been working for the benefit of the LGBTQ+ community to develop and promote understanding of sexuality and gender identity.[[4]](#footnote-4) Festivals to celebrate pride have been an annual staple of downtown parks for decades, including, as we shall see, in La Crosse.[[5]](#footnote-5)

As you visit each *Here, Here* story in this tour, consider the questions: What spaces, whether physical, social, or spiritual, are important to you? How did you find those spaces and how did you decide they were important to you? How would life be different if you did not have access to that space?

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**Story #1: Siiri Koski in Riverside Park** (Location #6, Story #8)

The first story in this tour highlights the 2017 Pride in the Park festival. The 7 Rivers LGBTQ+ Connection (The Center) organizes this event annually and has done since its inaugural year in 2006.[[6]](#footnote-6) For many years the Pride Festival was held at the Oktoberfest grounds just north of downtown. Much of it revolved around drinking and music. Pride in the Park moved to Riverside Park a few years ago to make it more open to all ages and the community at large. The festival also now occurs at the beginning of September; though LGBTQ+ pride is usually celebrated in June in honor of the Stonewall Riots, La Crosse holds its celebration in September to include students from La Crosse’s three college campuses. The event includes vendors, artisans, organizations, as well as live music. Other events of the weekend included a drag show, a golf tournament, and a picnic. The purpose of this weekend full of pride is to promote diversity and inclusivity in La Crosse.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Siiri Koski was just one of the hundreds of attendees of Pride of the Park. In her story, Siiri shares her experience about going to Pride in the Park as an out bisexual woman and the freedom she had being able to share with others that she attended the event. She emphasizes that this space is important to her because of the assumptions about her identity and the company she was able to share in Riverside Park.

**Siiri Koski’s Story Transcript**: Riverside Park is a great place for anybody who comes to La Crosse, to visit, who lives here. Pride is really fun. Couldn’t really miss it because of all the pride flags everywhere. The really gigantic one plus all the other small ones. The main attraction for me is that there’s a bunch of LGBTQ people there. I finally get to be in a place where I’m assumed to be gay over assumed to be straight. So that’s, like, the best part for me. But, there are tons of food trucks there from different areas so there’s lots of good food because everybody loves food trucks. The drag queens come by. Whoever won the La Crosse drag queen contest will have their crown and be walking around and that’s awesome, everybody loves the drag queens. I think that the most memorable thing for me at Pride in La Crosse is the first one this last year that I went to being out just because I was able to go there and, like, actually fit in with everybody and be out as a bisexual person as opposed to going as an ally. And so, it was really great because I was able to take pictures, bring my friends with, put them on social media, and just be really open about the fact that I was at Pride and I was, you know, celebrating it. I wouldn’t say that it helped me decide to come out, but it was definitely, like, I knew it would be there and it was a great support system. I knew that if I’d come out at least I could look forward to going to all these Pride events with other people that identify the same as me. So, it definitely made me feel more comfortable coming out. I think, just in general, if I were to say anything to a person listening to this, it would just be to be open-minded and friendly to your fellow human beings on earth. My name is Siiri and I moved here in second grade, grew up on the North Side actually, but I did live on the South Side for a little bit as well. And now I’m going to college here, so I really know the area and the people fairly well and I just, I like being here.

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**Story #2: Mary O'Sullivan** (Location #4, Story #4)

Now we are going to take a step back in time to the 1980s. Due to the gay liberation and lesbian feminist movements, the LGBTQ+ community in La Crosse continued to grow and be active through businesses, organizations, and fun get-togethers. Mary O’Sullivan (or Mary O, as she is known as in the LGBTQ+ community) is the next narrator, and she is an instrumental part of the community as an activist and an organizer. Jill Davey, an active member of the La Crosse lesbian community, started publishing monthly newsletters called the *NLFO* [*National Lesbian Feminist Organization] News* in 1979, of which Mary would later become a contributor. The newsletter would later be renamed the *Leaping La Crosse News* and would continue to be published until 2007. Mary O also founded the Women’s Opportunity Center at Western Technical College and sat on the board of the 7 Rivers LGBTQ Connection (The Center) for five years, serving as President for two.[[8]](#footnote-8) In Mary O’s *Hear, Here* story, she talks about the Tux Party and Out and About Women. Out and About Women started in 1980 by a group of women who had attended the Bloomington Women’s Music Festival and wanted to bring women’s performers to La Crosse. Mary O joined this group of women, and Out and About Women would bring music performers from all around the country to La Crosse, with support from the local lesbian community.[[9]](#footnote-9) Many of the artists booked by Out and About Women may have performed the Sue Fink’s 1977 song “Here Come the Lesbians--Here Come the Leaping Lesbians,” the song that inspired the title of the *Leaping La Crosse News.*

In this next story, Mary O describes how she started the annual Tux Party in the early 1980s when she and her then partner wanted to throw a formal birthday party. The Tux Party was a tradition within the lesbian community until 1991. It was described as a “gala affair,” and came to be a fundraiser for Out and About Women.[[10]](#footnote-10) As we will hear, the tuxes for this event were always supplied by the same company: Desmond’s Formal Wear.

Desmond’s was located at 112 S. 4th Street. John. W. Desmond Sr. purchased the store in 1948, and ran it until retiring in 1988.[[11]](#footnote-11) In a 1977 *La Crosse Tribune* article, Desmond credited the success of his business to keeping up with the changing styles, though, as we will learn from Mary’s story, the older styles of tuxedos did not go to waste.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Mary O’Sullivan’s Story Transcript**: So here we are standing across the street from Desmond’s Formal Wear at 112 4th street South. A friend of mine happened to be in Desmond’s Formal Wear getting ready to be in somebody’s wedding. Up on the second or third floor they discovered that there were a whole bunch of used tuxes that Desmond’ s had rented out and now they were sort of out of date and Desmond’s didn’t know what to do with them so they were just stacked in the attic up there.

My partner at the time and I had a birthday coming up, we said, “wouldn’t it be swell if we did a formal birthday party.” So for probably 3 or 4 weeks that building saw one by one and in twos and threes, lesbians from all over the community walking up and asking if they could see the used tuxes on the second floor and purchasing these tuxes for 4 or 5 dollars. This went on for 10 years. I don’t think they ever knew what a hot spot they were for the local Lesbian community. The Tux Party continued for 10 years and ending up being a fundraiser for Out and About Women, the local Women’s production company. Through all of that time it was just great fun for everybody.

My name is Mary O’Sullivan and pretty much I’ve been an agitator and organizer since I’ve arrived in La Crosse in 1975. I was part of Out and About that local production company starting probably in 1976 or 77 and working to do other kinds of organizing around the community since that late 70’s.

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**Story #3: Will Van Roosenbeek** (Location #3, Story #7)

The last story is closer to present day, bridging the narrative between the earlier years of the Tux Parties and the Pride in the Park celebration today. The Rainbow Revolution Bookstore opened its doors at 122 Fifth Avenue South in October of 1993 as part of a national movement of lesbian feminist bookstores. The bookstore carried books on alternative and New Age topics, including spiritualism, lesbian/gay literature, homeopathy, Native Americans, metaphysics, and vegetarianism. The bookstore also sold clothing items, crystals, jewelry, incense, tarot cards, and some magazines.[[13]](#footnote-13) Rainbow Revolution Bookstore as also the only place in La Crosse at the time where you could purchase LGBTQ+ Pride items, such as rainbow stickers and lesbian and gay symbols. The bookstore functioned as a gathering place for the LGBTQ+ community, as it hosted book groups and had spaces to meet old friends and new people alike. Linda Henkelman, the owner of the store, was an instrumental part in the early *Leaping La Crosse News*, when it was called the *NLFO* *News*. In a 1993 *Leaping La Crosse News* interview with Linda, she said opening a bookstore was a long-time dream, and she felt, at the time, that La Crosse was finally ready for a store like Rainbow Revolution.[[14]](#footnote-14)

At the bookstore, customers could browse the selection of books, media, and gifts, while enjoying free coffee and tea and the company of friends. Will Van Roosenbeek, the director of the Pride Center at UWL, was one such customer. In the last *Hear, Here* story on this tour, Will describes how he found the Rainbow Revolution Bookstore welcoming place to be himself as he questioned his sexuality, and connected with others within the growing LGBTQ+ community.

**Will Van Roosenbeek’s Story Transcript**: I’m Will Van Roosenbeek and I’m the director of the Pride Center at UWL. If someone new in the area, a lot of people would say ‘you should go to Rainbow Revolution Bookstore and talk with Gillie, ‘cause Gillie can connect you to whoever you need to know.’ The first time I went, I was very hesitant to go in the bookstore because I was kind of struggling with my sexual orientation at the time. I know when I first went in I was super nervous. At the front there was a bulletin board like right where you first came in and then there were a lot of flyers and I remember coming in and looking at those and standing there for awhile thinking ‘okay, you can turn around and look.’ They had a little area where people could sit and that’s where they sometimes would have like if there was a book group, a book group would meet there. I think Galaxy which is our LGBT youth group in La Crosse, I think for a while they met there. They definitely had lots of books. To access those books, there might be some at the library, but probably not most recent, so it was nice to go there and be able to see like what kind of LGBT books were out there. But they also did like a video rental. The places that did rent videos in La Crosse, they didn’t really have any LGBT films. I rented quite a few of them over time just because we, my partner and I, we had never seen any LGBT films. You know, this is our opportunity to check those things out. I did go to a couple of book groups there. One, it was a great opportunity to meet other LGBT folks in the community. It was just a neat opportunity to meet people that if you didn’t go to the bar you might not otherwise meet. And maybe they didn’t go to the bar either so it was another opportunity for people to connect with one another that didn’t have alcohol as the focus. It was a cool place and when you come to a small community like La Crosse, I think it’s important to have some of those places because as somebody who is underrepresented, there is, it’s nice to see a place that you know is for you. You know, before the internet and all that , Gillie was the internet. You would go and ask Gillie, “Are there any AA groups that are LGBT friendly? How do women meet each other if they don’t go to the bar?” She was the info person for the area which at that time was crucial that someone was doing that for the community. I think it’s probably one of the reasons that the community was strong and growing because you did have someone you could reach out to and ask for help.

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**Conclusion**

 This tour highlighted three LGBTQ+ voices that help tell the history of La Crosse’s LGBTQ+ community. They focused on spaces—from the physical, built environment like the bookstore to the temporary gathering spaces like Pride in the Park—that used to be and presently are important to the LGBTQ+ community. The tour began in the present day where the LGBTQ+ community is openly visible and LGBTQ+ couples have equal marriage rights. Siiri Koski’s story highlights this visibility by celebrating Pride in the Park as an out bisexual woman. Her joy from being able to celebrate her identity publicly and openly is evident in her story describing her experiences at the 2017 Pride in the Park. At the next stop, Mary O’Sullivan provided a wonderful story about how the lesbian community in the 1980s held their annual Tux Party to raise money for Out and About Women production company despite the New Right movement against pro-LGBTQ+ legislation. Finally, Will Van Roosenbeek’s story gave insight into what the Rainbow Revolution Bookstore meant to the LGBTQ+ community in La Crosse in the 1990s, describing it as a safe gathering space and resource.

At the end of this tour, we return to the questions we began with: What spaces, whether physical, social, or spiritual, are important to you? How did you find those spaces and how did you decide they were important to you? How would life be different if you did not have access to these spaces?

To each of our narrators, spaces where they could express their identity were extremely important. For further points to ponder inspired by this tour, consider: How do these spaces influence your identity? How does identity and the interaction of multiple identities influence those same spaces? How do we, as a collective society, decide what spaces are allowed to be created, and what spaces do not, and who has access to those spaces? And finally, how do those of the LGBTQ+ community create safe spaces for themselves and communicate that these spaces are safe?

1. Boarding houses, gyms, and bars provided spaces where people met others with same-sex interests. Many sought out sexual partners in places like movie houses or parks which led to police surveillance and entrapment. World War II veterans who had developed same-sex attracted networks organized in the 1940s and 50s and developed groups such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. La Crosse was voted one of the top five cities in the US for lesbians by *Girlfriends* *Magazine*, a national lesbian publication. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There are gay bars such as Players and Chances-R that operate as safe spaces for fun and revelry. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Center, “Our History,” https://7riverslgbtq.org/about/our-history/. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The tradition of pride festivals began in 1970 in New York City to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, with the first NYC Pride Parade, then known as the Christopher Street Liberation Day March. At the same time, Chicago also commemorated the anniversary of Stonewall, with week-long festivities, speeches, workshops, and demonstrations. Other urban areas, such as San Francisco and Los Angeles, celebrated in 1970 as well, and today communities all around the country celebrate Pride with parades and festivities. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Center, “Our History,” https://7riverslgbtq.org/about/our-history/. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Pyrek, Emily. “Showing PRIDE in La Crosse.” *La Crosse Tribune,* September 5, 2017. A1-A2.

Vian, Jourdan. “Area’s LGBT to celebrate pride.” *La Crosse Tribune*, September 5, 2015. B1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Center. 7 Rivers LGBTQ Connection, Febrary 2015, La Crosse, Wisconsin. https://7riverslgbtq.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/The-Center-February-2015-Newsletter.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mary O’Sullivan, “A-MUSE-ING AMAZON: A Retrospective on Out and About Women,” *Leaping La Crosse News*, October 1, 1983, page 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Leaping La Crosse News*, December 1982. *Leaping La Crosse News. Newsletter*. 1980-2007. La Crosse Mss 2016/TBD, Box 1, Folder 3: November 1982-December 1982. Special Collections and Area Research Center, Murphy Library, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, La Crosse, Wisconsin, and *Leaping La Crosse News,* November 1991, Volume 11, Issue 11. L*eaping La Crosse News. Newsletter.* 1980-2007. La Crosse Mss 2016/TBD, Box 1, Folder 12: August 1991-December 1991. Special Collections and Area Research Center, Murphy Library, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, La Crosse, Wisconsin. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Moor, Pat. “Desmond’s Formal Wear and La Crosse- a perfect fit.” *La Crosse Tribune*, 21 March 1993.

Prior to Desmond’s ownership, the store had been known as Howard’s Men’s Wear. The business grew considerably under Desmond, expanding to service 18 states and provided rental formal wear to about 500 retailers. Desmond’s also had four outlets in the Twin Cities area. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ellenbecker, John. “Employee buys clothing store.” *La Crosse Tribune*, 16 July 1977. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. New book store opens in La crosse, vertical file [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Leaping La Crosse News, Nov. 1993 in vertical file [↑](#footnote-ref-14)