

inside napa valley

Fall/Winter 2023

A path to healthy living



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Nick Otto, Register

Participants with the hiking group Hiking with Pride are seen walking along a trail at Sugarloaf Ridge State Park in Sonoma County.

Hiking with Pride fosters friendships

KATIE DeBENEDETTI

Did you know you can explore the entire orbit of Pluto right here in Napa County? Most people don't, but on a recent Saturday morning, a group of Napans in the "Hiking with Pride" group gathered to travel through the galaxy beginning at the metaphorical sun and circling around all nine planets while sharing stories, making friends and enjoying the first weekend of crisp fall air.

Throughout the four-and-a-half mile round trip, there was never a quiet moment. A constant stream of chatting and laughter, whether hikers were just meeting or catching up since



Nick Otto photos, Register

Hiking with Pride participants Keith Carter and Carl Hays look at a trail map before setting off on a group hike at Sugarloaf Ridge State Park in Sonoma County.

their last foray into the great outdoors, was the surefire guide that the back half of the group was traveling in the right direction, and the front half of the group hadn't lost their caboose.

This show of community — between 18-year-olds and retirees, members of the LGBTQ community and allies, and strangers who've become fast friends — is exactly what Gerry Parrott hoped for when he formed his Meetup hiking group back in June, he said.

Parrott has long been a member of other groups on Meetup, a website forum where people can post about and search for social events and groups in their areas. He's been an active member of the "Napa Gay Meetup" group and "Sonoma Gaydar" for many years, and actually had the idea to start "Hiking with Pride" at a Napa Gay Meetup get-together.

He explained that a lot of the events these groups host are at bars and restaurants, or other more traditional places for socializing. But this can feel intimidating, and sometimes isolating, he explained. "In these settings, groups tend to form quickly!"

When hiking though, it can be easier

to speak to more of the individuals in the group.

"The great thing about hiking is that throughout, some people move forward, some people fall behind. You get a chance to literally meet and talk with every single person there," Parrott said.

Already an avid hiker, Parrott thought that a Meetup group devoted to the activity could have a real audience. In June, he posted about the group on Meetup, and held its inaugural hike in early July. "I just thought, 'If you build it they will come,'" Parrott said, and in the few months since, many people have.

The group now boasts over 100 documented members on the Meetup app and Parrott has led a dozen or so hikes so far. He said that at every one, the number of people who are interested is continuing to grow, but the group is always different.

Quickly though, the group has also collected some regulars on the trails. These devoted hikers say that they have found a community, and even new friends, through Hiking with Pride, including Parrott himself.

"I've actually made a new best friend,

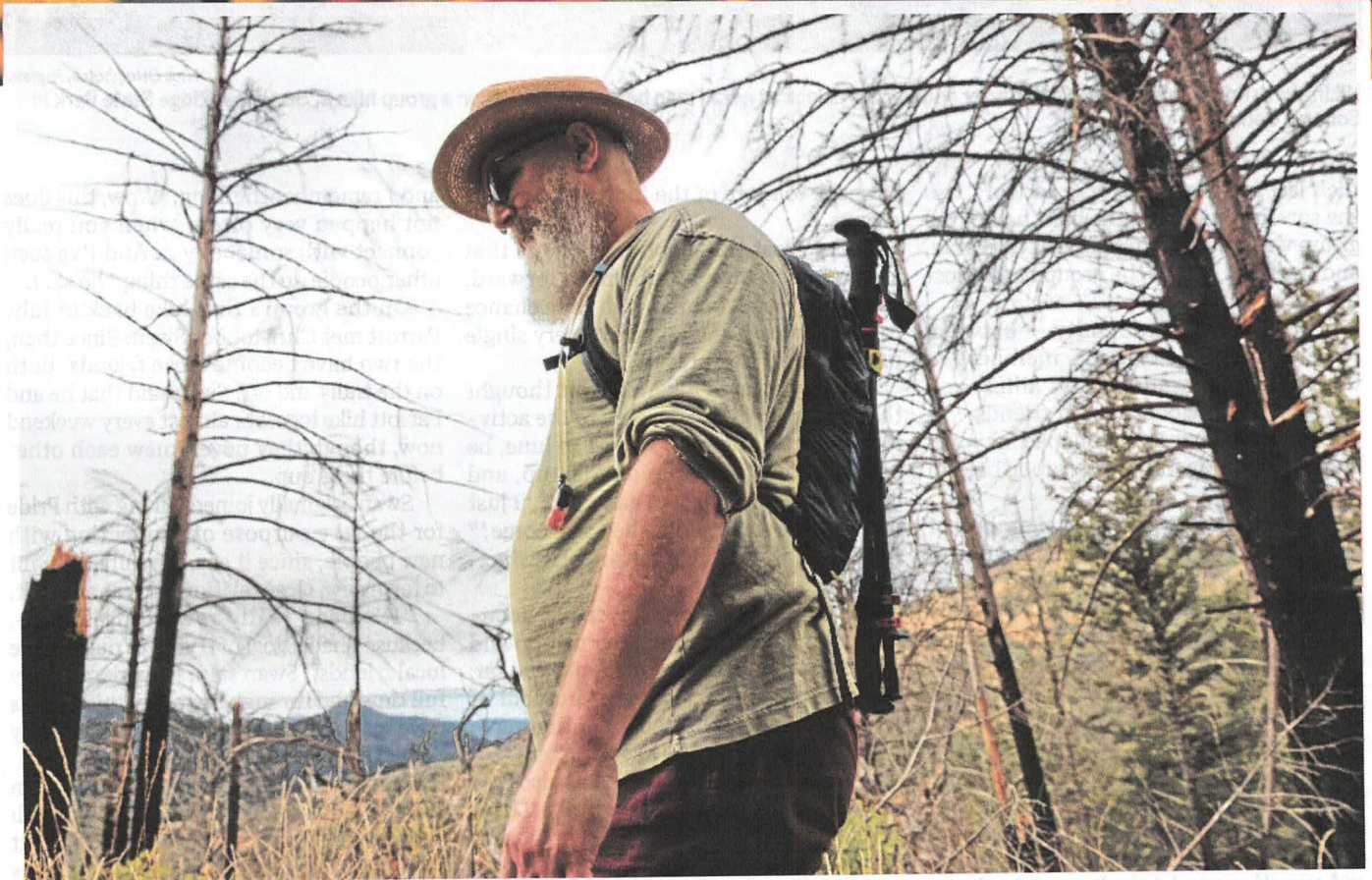
and I remember thinking, 'Wow, this does not happen very often,' when you really connect with somebody ... And I've seen other people do the same thing," he said.

On the group's first hike back in July, Parrott met Christopher Swan. Since then, the two have become close friends, both on the trails and off. Swan said that he and Parrott hike together almost every weekend now, though they never knew each other before the group.

Swan originally joined Hiking with Pride for the very purpose of connecting with new people, since it can be really difficult to form new, close relationships as an adult.

"It's been really rewarding for me, because I had a goal of trying to make more local friends," Swan said. "I work remotely full time and through the pandemic, things have really changed. This group has really helped me create new friendships."

Others in the group agree. Peter Herman found out about Hiking with Pride through another Meetup group both he and Parrott were members of. He said that he uses Meetup groups in general to meet new people, and has found this group in particular to foster a great community.



Pete Morris a participant in hiking group Hiking with Pride is seen walking along a trail at Sugarloaf Ridge State Park in Sonoma County.

“It’s just important that we find ways to reinforce and support each other and find real friendship and connection in this, at times, dark and lonely world,” Herman said. “I guess that’s what I would say is the reason for these groups...We really need each other.”

Members said that the COVID-19 pandemic has had reverberating effects that make connection harder: friends moving away, working more from home, and in general, people are self-isolating more often than before. A lot of people have found themselves struggling to get out of what hiker Carrie Canine described as an “emotional desert.”

Add on top of the lasting effects of the pandemic increases in anti-LGBTQ hate across the county, and the need for inclu-



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order to create safe spaces and equality of opportunity for LGBTQ+ people are really meant to fill those spaces with community connection, fun, love, whatever it might be,” Herman said. “It’s really important that we take advantage of these opportunities to really enrich our lives and connect with each other.” ■



PHOTOS: For more images of Hiking with Pride’s Sugarloaf hike, point your smartphone camera at the QR code and tap the link. [NEWSVU](#)

sive and welcoming community spaces becomes even greater, Swan said.

“The thing that I found very attractive about this initially going, and it’s come to be true, is that when there’s a community of like-minded people or people that share similar things to you, for example, being part of the LGBTQ community, [you know] people will just accept you,” Swan said. “They just get you, there’s no concern about safety or prejudice. I can go and know ‘I’m going to be welcomed by this.’”

Parrott said that growing up in neighboring Vallejo, he often felt that there weren’t many other young gay people that he knew and could connect with. He hopes that this group offers young people now the opportunity he didn’t have.

“All the things that we’ve been doing over the last many years in activism in





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