



glaad   
**SOUTHERN  
STORIES**

**A Guide for Reporting  
on LGBT People in  
Mississippi**

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When GLAAD’s 2015 Accelerating Acceptance report revealed that levels of discomfort towards the LGBT community are as high as 43% in America—and spike to 61% in the U.S. South—we knew we had to act. Now in its second year, this ongoing study by GLAAD and our partners at The Harris Poll of Americans’ attitudes towards the LGBT community shows that while comfort levels may be rising, more than half of Southerners believe their peers remain uncomfortable around LGBT people in various day-to-day situations, such as seeing a same-sex couple holding hands or learning a family member is LGBT. To accelerate LGBT acceptance in the U.S. South and to counter the growing levels of apathy towards LGBT acceptance nationwide, GLAAD is telling the stories of LGBT people from across the region through our Southern Stories initiative.

We are amplifying experiences of LGBT people who are resilient in the face of inequality and adversity and are building a culture in which they are able not only to survive, but also to thrive. These are impactful stories with the power to change hearts and minds, but they are too often missed or ignored altogether.

In some ways, it’s both the “best of times” and the “worst of times” for the LGBT community in Mississippi. While Mississippi has the highest number of same-sex couples raising children, it was also the first state to enact a so-called “religious freedom” law, which gives license to businesses to discriminate against LGBT people. This dichotomy illustrates both the challenges that LGBT Mississippians face, as well as how LGBT families have worked hard to build community and live the lives they love.

Our hope is that this guide will serve as a useful tool for the media as it works to effectively tell the stories of LGBT people in Mississippi during this new era of progress and possibility. As always, GLAAD stands ready to assist in any way possible to ensure that LGBT Mississippians’ voices are heard in local and national media.

**Sarah Kate Ellis**  
GLAAD President & CEO



# Getting Started

LGBT Mississippians strive to live their fullest lives despite encountering hurdles along the way. For instance, Tupelo is home to the anti-LGBT group American Family Values Association, an organization that believes being gay “is a poor and dangerous choice” that creates “a litany of health hazards to...society as a whole.”<sup>1</sup>

However, no other state in the nation is home to a larger proportion of LGBT couples raising families.<sup>2</sup> LGBT people in Mississippi, including the 26% of Mississippi same-sex couples raising children,<sup>3</sup> are testaments to the vibrancy that has long persevered in a state in which LGBT citizens are not wholly accepted by their neighbors or treated as equals in the eyes of the law.

LGBT people in Mississippi currently lack statewide protections that would prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, bullying, health care, and public accommodations. But fortunately, many of their fellow Southerners stand with them in support of equality. Seventy-eight percent of non-LGBT people living in the South agree that despite achieving marriage equality for same-sex couples, there is still more work to be done before LGBT people reach full acceptance.<sup>4</sup> In some places, such support has even been put into action, helping to legally protect the LGBT population. The city of Starkville, for example, bans discrimination in public employment on the basis of gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation.<sup>5</sup>

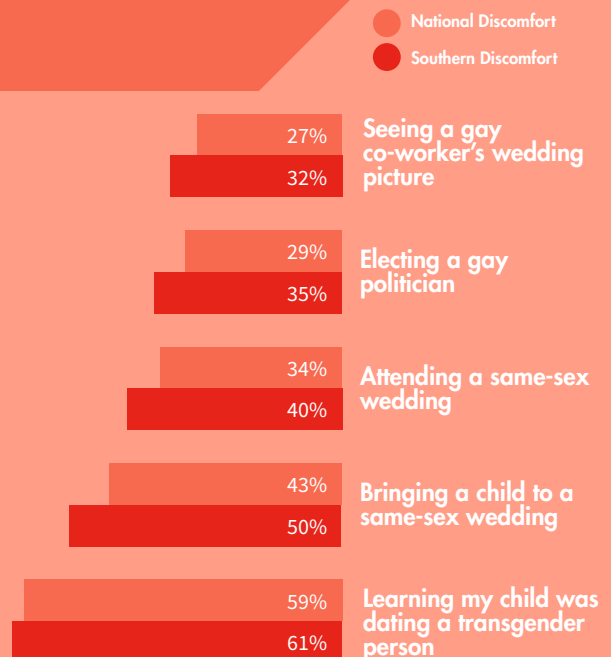
In response to the passage of Mississippi’s so-called “Religious Freedom Restoration Act” in 2014, many of the state’s municipalities also passed (non-binding) nondiscrimination resolutions supporting protections inclusive of gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation.<sup>6</sup> Marriage is legal, following the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling in June 2015, and despite some resistance from marriage officiators, many LGBT couples, as well as religious and secular marriage officiators, are coming together in matrimony at last.

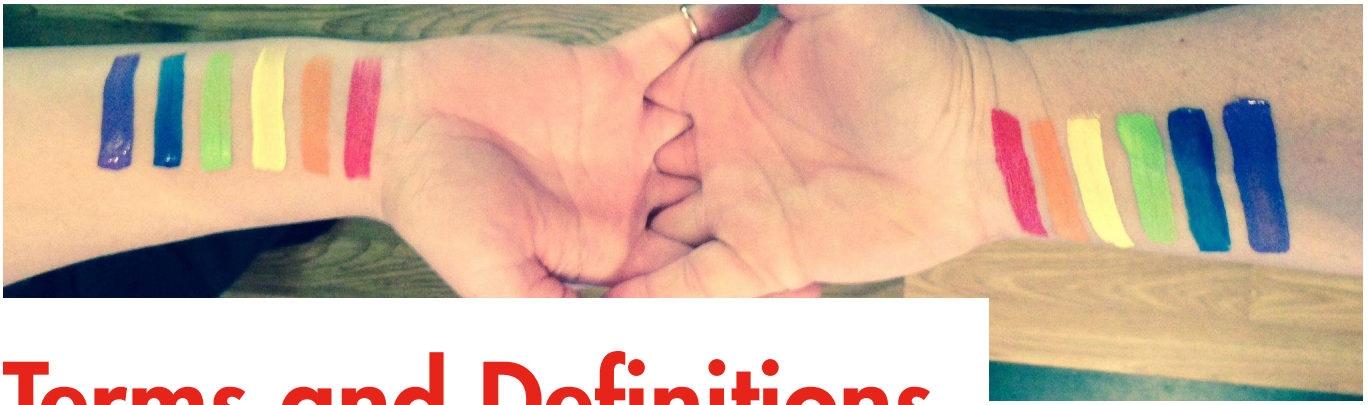
There’s still work to be done before LGBT people reach full acceptance and equality in Mississippi, and until then, they will continue to face challenges head on, build bright futures for their communities, and live their lives authentically throughout the Magnolia State. In the words of lesbian advocate Reverend Brandiilayne Dear, “I’m not willing to live quietly. We need to live authentic lives and our communities need to see us and so we really encourage people to live authentic lives, especially in this area. This is my state and you know what I’ve just decided that you’re not going to run me off. I’m going to live my life and I’m going to do everything I possibly can to change things.”<sup>7</sup>

## Why the South? Why now?

In late 2014, GLAAD commissioned The Harris Poll to measure attitudes towards LGBT Americans. What we found is that while the public is increasingly embracing equal protections under the law, many are still uncomfortable with having LGBT people in their families and the communities where they live. Within these numbers, we find that Southerners feel significantly more discomfort about their LGBT families, friends, and neighbors than is found in other regions of the country. The following year, GLAAD and The Harris Poll found that while this gap is starting to slowly close, Southerners are more unconcerned or unaware of important issues facing the LGBT community than the general U.S. population. By amplifying the voices of LGBT Southerners, GLAAD is working to bring these pressing disparities to light in order to accelerate LGBT acceptance.

For more information, visit [glaad.org/acceptance](http://glaad.org/acceptance)





# Terms and Definitions

**Sexual orientation** – The scientifically accurate term for an individual’s enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual (straight) orientations. Avoid the offensive term “sexual preference,” which is used to suggest that being gay, lesbian or bisexual is voluntary and therefore “curable.” People need not have had specific sexual experiences to know their own sexual orientation; in fact, they need not have had any sexual experience at all.

**LGBT / GLBT** – Acronym for “lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.” LGBT and/or GLBT are often used because they are more inclusive of the diversity of the community. Care should be taken to ensure that audiences are not confused by their use. Ensure that the acronym is spelled out on first usage.

**Queer** – Traditionally a pejorative term, *queer* has been appropriated by some LGBT people to describe themselves. However, it is not universally accepted even within the LGBT community and should be avoided unless describing someone who self-identifies that way or in a direct quote. When Q is seen at the end of “LGBT,” it typically means queer and/or questioning.

**Homophobia** – Fear of lesbians and gay men. *Intolerance or prejudice* is usually a more accurate description of antipathy toward LGBT people.

**Marriage** – Many states, including Mississippi, had voted against recognizing marriage for same-sex couples. Because a key section of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), passed by the federal government in 1996, was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in June 2013, however, legally married couples became recognized by the federal government. Furthermore, in June 2015, the Supreme Court’s historic ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* determined that the U.S. Constitution guarantees the right for everyone to marry the person they love.

**Bisexual, bi (adj.)** – Describes a person who has the capacity to form enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attractions to those of the same gender or to those of another gender. People may experience this attraction in differing ways and degrees over their lifetimes. Bisexual people need not have had specific sexual experiences to be bisexual; in fact, they need not have had any sexual experience at all to identify as bisexual.

**Transgender (adj.)** – An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. People under the transgender umbrella may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms – including *transgender*. Some of those terms are defined below. Use the descriptive term preferred by the individual. Many transgender people are prescribed hormones by their doctors to change their bodies.

Some undergo surgery as well, but not all transgender people can or will take those steps, and a transgender identity is not dependent upon medical procedures.

**Trans** – Used as shorthand to mean *transgender* or *transsexual* – or sometimes to be inclusive of a wide variety of identities under the transgender umbrella. Because its meaning is not precise or widely understood, be careful when using it with audiences who may not understand what it means. Avoid unless used in a direct quote or in cases where you can clearly explain the term’s meaning in the context of your story.

**Transgender man** – People who were assigned female at birth but identify and live as a man may use this term to describe themselves. They may shorten it to trans man. (Note: trans man, not “transman.”) Some may also use FTM, an abbreviation for female-to-male. Some may prefer to simply be called *men*, without any modifier. It is best to ask which term an individual prefers.

**Transgender woman** – People who were assigned male at birth but identify and live as a woman may use this term to describe themselves. They may shorten to trans woman. (Note: *trans woman*, not “transwoman.”) Some may also use MTF, an abbreviation for male-to-female. Some may prefer to simply be called *women*, without any modifier. It is best to ask which term an individual prefers.

**Transition** – Altering one’s birth sex is not a one-step procedure; it is a complex process that occurs over a long period of time. Transition includes some or all of the following personal, medical, and legal steps: telling one’s family, friends, and co-workers; using a different name and new pronouns; dressing differently; changing one’s name and/or sex on legal documents; hormone therapy; and possibly (though not always) one or more types of surgery. The exact steps involved in transition vary from person to person. **Avoid the phrase “sex change.”**

**Gender non-conforming** – A term used to describe some people whose gender expression is different from conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity. **Please note that not all gender non-conforming people identify as transgender; nor are all transgender people gender non-conforming.** Many people have gender expressions that are not entirely conventional – that fact alone does not make them transgender. Many transgender men and women have gender expressions that are conventionally masculine or feminine. Simply being transgender does not make someone gender non-conforming. *The term is not a synonym for transgender or transsexual and should only be used if someone self-identifies as gender non-conforming.*

# Mississippi's LGBT History

The timeline on these pages accounts for some of the important milestones in Mississippi's LGBT history. It is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to provide a context in which LGBT people in the state find themselves living at this critical juncture in the movement for equality and acceptance.

## 1973

### Mississippi Gay Alliance is founded

The Mississippi Gay Alliance, the state's first gay and lesbian political organization, forms. Its leaders also form the state's first Metropolitan Community Church in 1983.<sup>8</sup>

## 1993

### Camp Sister Spirit opens in Ovett

A feminist bookstore-turned-retreat center, run by a lesbian couple, Camp Sister Spirit opens and experiences repeated aggression from the local community in Ovett, including shootings, death threats, dead animals left at the camp's entrance, a nuisance lawsuit, defamation, and renting discrimination.<sup>10</sup> Support for the bookstore from the surrounding community grows in the 2000s, and the center becomes a site for aid amidst the chaos of Hurricane Katrina. The center closes in 2008 when one of the founders passes away. Some LGBT advocates in the South call Camp Sister Spirit the "Stonewall of the South," in honor of the way it persevered against discrimination.

## 1996

### Governor Kirk Fordice issues executive ban on marriage equality

Mississippi becomes the first state to bar marriage for same-sex couples by executive order.<sup>13</sup> Fordice is critiqued for issuing an executive order in lieu of what could have, instead, been submitted as a bill for legislative consideration. Nonetheless, a legislative ban on marriage equality is passed the next year.

## 1981

### Senator John Hinson faces charges for same-sex relationship

U.S. Senator John Hinson, who represents Mississippi, faces a felony "morals charge" from the D.C. Superior Court for having a relationship with another man who worked at the Library of Congress.<sup>9</sup> He eventually resigns after the scandal goes public and, though he never returns to his home state of Mississippi, he goes on to become an advocate for LGBT equality.

## 1995

### Teen sentenced to life in prison for murdering two gay men

On October 7, 1995, Marvin McClendon shot and killed two gay men, Robert Walters and Joseph Shoemaker, outside of Laurel, Mississippi. Watched closely by the national LGBT community and advocacy groups, the defendant McClendon's "gay panic" defense, in which the defendant tries to convince the jury that the victims' sexual orientation is responsible for the defendant's violent action,<sup>11</sup> does not hold up in court, and he is sentenced to life in prison.<sup>12</sup>



## 2000

### Same-sex adoption banned

The Mississippi House of Representatives passes a bill that bans same-sex couples from adopting children. Governor Ronnie Musgrove signs the bill into law. In 2015, a lawsuit seeking to overturn the ban is filed by the Campaign for Southern Equality, the Family Equality Council, and four same-sex Mississippi couples.<sup>14</sup> The lawsuit remains pending at the time of this writing.

### Equality Mississippi forms

After the murder of a gay man, Jamie Ray Tolbert, Equality Mississippi responds with a push for greater acceptance and LGBT equality.<sup>15</sup> The group closes its doors in 2008 due to lack of funds, but it reopens in 2013 and continues working towards full equality and acceptance in Mississippi today.<sup>16</sup>



## 2001

### University of Southern Mississippi Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) forms

The university's GSA is formed to provide a safe space and serve as a catalyst for social support and action against homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination.<sup>17</sup>

## 2004

### State constitutional amendment passes, excluding same-sex couples from marriage

Mississippi's Amendment 1, defining marriage as a union between one man and one woman in the state's constitution, passes with 86% approval from voters.<sup>20</sup>

### Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) Oxford hosts its first meeting

The Mississippi state chapter of PFLAG meets monthly and acts as a support organization for friends and families of LGBT people. It supports PFLAG's national mission of advocating for LGBT people. Additional chapters will later open in Jackson, Tupelo, and Laurel as well.

### Unity Mississippi forms

A small group of LGBT advocates join together to create the organization that strives to promote unity among the LGBT and non-LGBT communities and combat the "isolation, discrimination, and lack of community" that can come with being LGBT in Mississippi.<sup>21</sup>

### State court orders an end to discrimination against incarcerated people living with HIV

A Mississippi judge rules in favor of a group of incarcerated people in Mississippi being denied access to work programs because of their HIV statuses. Two hundred thirty-eight incarcerated people in Mississippi are affected at the time.<sup>22</sup>

## 2003

### Lawrence v. Texas eliminates laws against same-sex relationships

In a 7-2 decision written by Justice Anthony Kennedy, state laws banning same-sex sexual activity, such as sodomy laws in Mississippi, are ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court rules that such laws violate the Fourteenth Amendment's Due Process Clause, which is designed to protect a substantive right to personal liberty in intimate decisions. Same-sex partners in Mississippi can no longer be legally apprehended for engaging in consensual sexual activity.<sup>18</sup>

### Boycott is held against City of Gulfport

Gulfport City Council passes a resolution condemning the U.S. Supreme Court for decriminalizing same-sex couples' consensual relationships. In response, Equality Mississippi organizes a boycott of the city, encouraging the gay cruise industry to avoid using the coastal town as a docking station.<sup>19</sup>



## 2005

### Unity Mississippi hosts the first OUToberfest

This now-annual festival takes place each October in honor of National Coming Out Day. It is held for the first time to build positive LGBT sentiment in Mississippi. In 2012, the event evolves into Pride Mississippi and is held during the summer in order to secure permits and stabilize funding.<sup>23</sup>



## 2008

### Mississippi Safe Schools Coalition is founded

This state branch of the national organization combats bullying, harassment, and harmful policies with the goal of making Mississippi schools safe and affirming spaces for all LGBT youth.<sup>25</sup>

## 2010

### Mississippi Damned premieres

Directed by and based on the life of Tina Mabry, the film follows three African American young people growing up in Mississippi in the 1980s and 90s and includes a story about a lesbian teen.<sup>27</sup> Despite winning multiple awards, the film is unable to find distribution.

### Itawamba High School forbids lesbian student from attending prom

Lesbian teen Constance McMillen requests permission from her high school to bring her girlfriend to prom and wear a tuxedo. When the school denies her request, cancels prom, and encourages parents to organize a private prom, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) files a lawsuit on her behalf and prevails. The school becomes the first in the state to adopt a

nondiscrimination policy that includes protection on the basis of sexual orientation.<sup>28</sup>

### Jackson passes anti-profiling ordinance

With a 6-1 vote, Jackson City Council passes an ordinance protecting people from being stopped or detained by police on the sole basis of one's perceived race, immigration status, sexual orientation, or gender identity.<sup>29</sup>

### Corrections officer fired for being gay after surviving physical assault

Andre Cooley of Hattiesburg is told he is losing his job because he is gay. Cooley is fired just two days after calling 911 when his boyfriend becomes violent in their home, and Cooley's supervisor responds to the call, learning at the scene that Cooley is gay. He is also denied unemployment benefits. American

Civil Liberties Union of Mississippi (ACLU of MS) files a lawsuit on his behalf against the Forrest County Sheriff's Department and his supervisors.<sup>30</sup> The following year, Cooley is reinstated and the Sheriff's Department updates its nondiscrimination policy to include sexual orientation as a protected class.<sup>31</sup>



Constance McMillen

## 2006

### Small Town Gay Bar documentary is released

This documentary focusing on bars primarily serving the LGBT community in two small Mississippi towns, Shannon and Meridian, debuts as part of the Sundance Film Festival's Official Selection for 2006.<sup>24</sup>

## 2009

### Rise Above for Youth is founded

This service and advocacy organization works for youth transitioning from foster care, juvenile justice, and homelessness in Mississippi. Services provided include support groups for LGBT youth facing these issues, counseling, life skills training, and other resources.<sup>26</sup>

## 2013

### First LGBT healthcare center in Mississippi opens

My Brother's Keeper, a nonprofit group working closely with the LGBT community, launches The Open Arms Healthcare Center, which offers LGBT-inclusive healthcare, including HIV and AIDS prevention and care.<sup>32,33</sup>

### Marco McMillian is murdered

Gay candidate for mayor of Clarksdale, the first LGBT candidate for public office in Mississippi, is violently murdered.<sup>34</sup> Later, the defendant claims an unsuccessful "gay panic" defense. The defendant is found guilty and sentenced to life in prison without parole.

### Southeastern LGBT Activist Camp held in Jackson for youth

Now known as Queer Youth Leading

the South, this annual gathering hosts 40 LGBT and allied students from across the South for five days of anti-oppression work designed to strengthen regional bonds and foster the next generation of social justice leaders.<sup>35</sup>

### Mississippi Gulf Coast Rainbow Center is founded

Created to foster unity and safety for Mississippians in the Gulf Coast region for both present and future generations, the center operates online to conduct education and advocacy.<sup>36</sup>

### Protest held at so-called "ex-gay conversion therapy" conference

In response to a multi-day, so-called "ex-gay conversion therapy" retreat taking place in Hattiesburg, GetEqual, Omega MS, and Walk Fellowship organize a rally of

love and acceptance to protest the harmful program. Efforts to change sexual orientation have been denounced by nearly every major medical association.<sup>37</sup>

### The Dandelion Project is founded

The Dandelion Project, a support group for LGBT people in southern Mississippi, sponsors and promotes "an educational and outreach agenda designed to serve individuals regardless of where they may be in their own personal journey."<sup>38</sup> Members of the Dandelion Project later appear in a Showtime documentary: *The L Word Mississippi: Hate the Sin*.<sup>39</sup>



## 2014

### Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) passes legislature

In a thinly veiled effort to enshrine discrimination in state law, Mississippi's state legislature passes RFRA, which prohibits state action that "burdens a person's right to exercise religion," allowing someone the opportunity to treat an LGBT person differently, such as refusing service, if they claim religious reasons.<sup>40</sup> The act includes the Mississippi Student Religious Liberties Act, which prohibits educators from reprimanding a student for expressing or acting on anti-LGBT sentiment, such as bullying.<sup>41</sup> More than 350 clergy leaders state- and nation-wide denounce the bill and call on others to do so as well.<sup>42</sup>

### The Spectrum Center is founded

This community center is formed to be an advocate and resource for Hattiesburg's LGBT community. The center works with other regional organizations to provide social space, support groups, and health services. In the future, the center hopes to expand its services to include counseling, a community kitchen and pantry, and transitional housing for displaced youth.<sup>43</sup>

### Non-binding nondiscrimination resolutions pass in several cities

In response to RFRA passing earlier in the year, several cities in Mississippi pass nondiscrimination resolutions that include "gender

identity" and "sexual orientation" as protected classes.<sup>44</sup> The resolutions are non-binding, but they serve as a message of support from city governments for LGBT Mississippians. Oxford's City Council, for example, unanimously votes to recognize and respect the dignity and worth of all the city's residents, including the LGBT community. Oxford joins the cities of Starkville and Hattiesburg in celebrating the diversity of all residents.<sup>45</sup>

### Chapter of LGBT-affirming Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) opens in Hattiesburg

In conjunction with the Spectrum Center, Joshua Generation MCC offers a dynamic worship service for

everyone regardless of age, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, or social status.<sup>46</sup>

### RISE releases a report on anti-LGBT discrimination in the South

Research Initiative on Social Justice and Equity (RISE) releases a report about anti-LGBT discrimination in the U.S. South with an emphasis on Mississippi called LGBT Bias and Discrimination: Occurrence, Outcomes, and the Impact of Policy Change.<sup>47</sup> The group finds that discrimination against the LGBT community is an ongoing phenomenon in Mississippi and an effective way to change it is through nondiscrimination polices.<sup>48</sup>



## 2015

### Obergefell v. Hodges rules bans on marriage equality unconstitutional

In a 5-4 ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court requires all states to both wed same-sex couples and recognize the marriages of same-sex couples performed out of state. The ruling is met with resistance by some Mississippi marriage officiators, but orders to carry through with marriages for same-sex couples in all counties are issued a few days after the ruling.

### First Unified Southern Fried Pride is held in Hattiesburg

Hosted by the Spectrum Center, this is the first annual Pride celebration in Hattiesburg. The inaugural event is held to celebrate love, equality, unity, and the Southern Campaign for Equality for their work to make marriage equality a reality.<sup>49</sup>

### ACLU of Mississippi helps LGBT young adults learn their rights

In partnership with the Nollie Jenkins Family Center, ACLU of Mississippi co-authors "Advocating for LGBTQ Students Rights in the Mississippi Delta Resource Guide," which is available on the group's website. The comprehensive resource details the various rights to which LGBT youth and young adults are entitled, from freedom of speech to attending prom; inequalities in the Magnolia state, like harassment and criminalization; and ways to become an ally, accelerate acceptance, and more.<sup>50</sup>

# Terms to Avoid

## Offensive: “homosexual” (n. or adj.)

**Preferred: “gay” (adj.); “gay man” or “lesbian” (n.); “gay person/people”**

Please use *gay* or *lesbian* to describe people attracted to members of the same sex. Because of the clinical history of the word “homosexual,” it is aggressively used by anti-gay extremists to suggest that gay people are somehow diseased or psychologically/emotionally disordered – notions discredited by the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association in the 1970s. Please avoid using “homosexual” except in direct quotes. Please also avoid using “homosexual” as a style variation simply to avoid repeated use of the word “gay.” The Associated Press, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* restrict use of the term “homosexual.”

## Offensive: “homosexual relations/relationship,” “homosexual couple,” “homosexual sex,” etc.

**Preferred: “relationship,” “couple” (or, if necessary, “gay couple”), “sex,” etc.**

Identifying a same-sex couple as “a homosexual couple,” characterizing their relationship as “a homosexual relationship,” or identifying their intimacy as “homosexual sex” is extremely offensive and should be avoided. These constructions are frequently used by anti-gay extremists to denigrate gay people, couples, and relationships.

As a rule, try to avoid labeling an activity, emotion or relationship *gay*, *lesbian*, or *bisexual* unless you would call the same activity, emotion or relationship “straight” if engaged in by someone of another orientation. In most cases, your readers, viewers or listeners will be able to discern people’s sexes and/or orientations through the names of the parties involved, your depictions of their relationships, and your use of pronouns.

## Offensive: “sexual preference”

**Preferred: “sexual orientation” or “orientation”**

The term “sexual preference” is typically used to suggest that being *lesbian*, *gay* or *bisexual* is a choice and therefore can and should be “cured.” Sexual orientation is the accurate description of an individual’s enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex and is inclusive of *lesbians*, *gay men*, *bisexuals*, as well as *straight men* and *women*.

## Offensive: “gay lifestyle” or “homosexual lifestyle”

**Preferred: “gay lives,” “gay and lesbian lives”**

There is no single *lesbian*, *gay* or *bisexual* lifestyle. *Lesbians*, *gay men*, and *bisexuals* are diverse in the ways they lead their lives. The phrase “gay lifestyle” is used to denigrate *lesbians*, *gay men*, and *bisexuals* suggesting that their orientation is a choice and therefore can and should be “cured.”

## Offensive: “admitted homosexual” or “avowed homosexual”

**Preferred: “openly lesbian,” “openly gay,” “openly bisexual,” or simply “out”**

Dated term used to describe those who self-identify as *gay*, *lesbian*, or *bisexual* in their personal, public, and/or professional lives. The words “admitted” or “avowed” suggest that being *gay* is somehow shameful or inherently secretive. You may also simply describe the person as being out, for example: “Ricky Martin is an out pop star from Puerto Rico.” Avoid the use of the word “homosexual” in any case.

## Offensive: “gay agenda” or “homosexual agenda”

**Preferred: accurate descriptions of the issues (e.g., “inclusion in existing nondiscrimination and hate crimes laws,” “ending the ban on transgender service members”)**

*Lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, and *transgender* people are motivated by the same hopes, concerns, and desires as other everyday Americans. They seek to be able to earn a living, be safe in their communities, serve their country, and take care of the ones they love. Their commitment to equality is one they share with many allies and advocates who are not LGBT. Notions of a so-called “homosexual agenda” are rhetorical inventions of anti-gay extremists seeking to create a climate of fear by portraying the pursuit of equal opportunity for LGBT people as sinister.

## Offensive: “special rights”

**Preferred: “equal rights” or “equal protection”**

Anti-gay extremists frequently characterize equal protection of the law for *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, and *transgender* people as “special rights” to incite opposition to such things as relationship recognition and inclusive nondiscrimination laws.

## Problematic: “transgenders,” “a transgender”

**Preferred: transgender people, a transgender person**

*Transgender* should be used as an adjective, not as a noun. Do not say, “Tony is a transgender,” or “The parade included many transgenders.” Instead say, “Tony is a transgender man,” or “The parade included many transgender people.”

## Problematic: “transgendered”

**Preferred: transgender**

The adjective *transgender* should never have an extraneous “-ed” tacked onto the end. An “-ed” suffix adds unnecessary length to the word and can cause tense confusion and grammatical errors. It also brings *transgender* into alignment with *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual*. You would not say that Elton John is “gayed” or Ellen DeGeneres is “lesbianed,” therefore you would not say Chaz Bono is “transgendered.”

# Defamatory Language

## Problematic: “transgenderism”

### Preferred: none

This is not a term commonly used by transgender people. This is a term used by anti-transgender activists to dehumanize transgender people and reduce who they are to “a condition.” Refer to *being transgender* instead, or refer to the *transgender community*. You can also refer to *the movement for transgender equality*.

## Problematic: “sex change,” “pre-operative,” “post-operative”

### Preferred: assigned male at birth, assigned female at birth or designated male at birth, designated female at birth

Referring to a “sex-change operation,” or using terms such as “pre-operative” or “post-operative,” inaccurately suggests that one must have surgery in order to transition. Avoid overemphasizing surgery when discussing transgender people or the process of transition.

## Problematic: “biologically male,” “biologically female,” “genetically male,” “genetically female,” “born a man,” “born a woman”

### Preferred: assigned male at birth, assigned female at birth or designated male at birth, designated female at birth

Problematic phrases like those above are reductive and overly simplify a very complex subject. As mentioned above, a person’s sex is determined by a number of factors - not simply genetics - and one’s biology does not “trump” one’s gender identity. Finally, people are born babies - they are not “born a man” or “born a woman.”

### Defamatory: “fag,” “faggot,” “dyke,” “homo,” “sodomite,” and similar epithets

The criteria for using these derogatory terms should be the same as those applied to vulgar epithets used to target other groups: they should not be used except in a direct quote that reveals the bias of the person quoted. So that such words are not given credibility in the media, it is preferred that reporters say, “The person used a derogatory word for a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender person.”

### Defamatory: “deviant,” “disordered,” “dysfunctional,” “diseased,” “perverted,” “destructive” and similar descriptions

The notion that being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is a psychological disorder was discredited by the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association in the 1970s. Today, words such as “deviant,” “diseased,” and “disordered” often are used to portray LGBT people as less than human, mentally ill, or as a danger to society. Words such as these should be avoided in stories about the LGBT community. If they must be used, they should be quoted directly in a way that clearly reveals the bias of the person being quoted.

### Defamatory: associating gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people with pedophilia, child abuse, sexual abuse, bestiality, bigamy, polygamy, adultery, and/or incest

Being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender is neither synonymous with, nor indicative of, any tendency toward pedophilia, child abuse, sexual abuse, bestiality, bigamy, polygamy, adultery, and/or incest. Such claims, innuendoes, and associations often are used to insinuate that LGBT people pose a threat to society, to families, and to children in particular. Such assertions and insinuations are defamatory and should be avoided, except in direct quotes that clearly reveal the bias of the person quoted.

### Defamatory: “deceptive,” “fooling,” “pretending,” “posing,” “trap,” or “masquerading”

Gender identity is an integral part of a person’s identity. Do not characterize transgender people as “deceptive,” as “fooling” or “trapping” others, or as “pretending” to be, “posing,” or “masquerading” as a man or a woman. Such descriptions are defamatory and insulting.

### Defamatory: “tranny,” “she-male,” “he/she,” “it,” “shim”

These words dehumanize transgender people and should not be used in mainstream media. The criteria for using these derogatory terms should be the same as those applied to vulgar epithets used to target other groups: they should not be used except in a direct quote that reveals the bias of the person quoted. So that such words are not given credibility in the media, it is preferred that reporters say, “The person used a derogatory word for a transgender person.” Please note that while some transgender people may use “tranny” to describe themselves, others find it profoundly offensive.

### Defamatory: “bathroom bill”

A term created and used by far-right extremists to oppose nondiscrimination laws that protect transgender people. The term is geared to incite fear and panic at the thought of encountering transgender people in public restrooms. Simply refer to the *nondiscrimination law/ordinance* instead.

# Best Practices in Media Coverage

## **First and foremost, is this person's sexual orientation and/or gender identity relevant to the story?**

If it's not immediately relevant to the story or profile, there is no need to include it. If it is relevant, then be sure to use accurate and respectful terminology to discuss the LGBT-identified person.

## **Use a personal lens in your reporting**

If the individual's sexual orientation and/or gender identity is indeed relevant to the piece, ask for personal stories. Ask about both the joys and challenges of being LGBT in Mississippi. Ask about relationships and networks of support.

## **Include voices of people who identify as LGBT**

Often, news coverage silences the community by covering anti-LGBT legislation and social groups without including the voices of those who are most affected. Hearing from everyday LGBT-identified people - not just allies or advocates - is critically important. Positive change is made when marginalized persons and groups are humanized in the press.

## **Personal details about someone's life may be more important than labels**

If sexual orientation or gender identity is indeed relevant to the piece, be sure to use accurate and respectful terminology to discuss the subject. You do not have to necessarily apply an LGBT label to them, but rather provide details that give a fuller picture of the subject's life. For example, "When Tonya Johnson isn't running the new tech startup, she's at home helping her wife raise their two children."

## **Include LGBT angles in stories that may not immediately appear to have an LGBT focus**

Stories like immigration, health care, housing, and even the economy can have LGBT angles. One of the questions to ask is, "What impact does this have on someone who is LGBT?" Finding subjects who can speak to this angle is important.

## **Explore the intersection of LGBT issues with other identities**

LGBT people do not live in a vacuum, but rather approach the world with other identities, including race, gender, and class. To isolate out an LGBT identity from the rest of the person is to make them one-dimensional. Ask questions that can talk about the challenges and privileges that come with various aspects of one's identity.



## **Challenge anti-LGBT activists with accurate information about the LGBT community**

Often, pundits will make claims about the LGBT community that are not based on fact as a way to score political points. Do not let fallacies stand. Rather, note the inaccuracies when they are stated and present clear and factual information in their stead. If you want more information on anti-LGBT activists, visit [glaad.org/cap](http://glaad.org/cap). The **GLAAD Commentator Accountability Project (CAP)** aims to put critical information about frequent anti-gay interviewees into the hands of newsrooms, editors, hosts, and reporters.

## **Reach out to state and local organizations**

The more localized your sources, the better able you are to tell an accurate, genuine story. State and local organizations can more readily tell you what is at hand in their communities. See the list of Mississippi-based LGBT organizations on page 15 of this guide.





## Pitfalls to Avoid

### **Avoid omitting coverage of Mississippi's anti-LGBT laws**

Coverage of Mississippi and its political progress should make note of the state's anti-LGBT laws whenever possible. Omitting information about this community may give the impression that your news outlet is overlooking the safety of LGBT Mississippians or condones the state's anti-LGBT laws.

### **Avoid minimizing the advancements of the LGBT community in Mississippi**

While Mississippi is not the archetype for LGBT acceptance in the United States, do not ignore the progress and progressive ideas that emerge from the southern state. Highlighting advancements sends hope to LGBT individuals in the state and at large.

### **Avoid speaking only to anti-LGBT activists about LGBT people**

It is hard to hate somebody when you know their story. When the media acts as a non-partisan conduit of people's stories, cultural acceptance becomes much more attainable.

### **Avoid pitting people of faith against LGBT people**

Being a person of faith and an LGBT person are not mutually exclusive. Do not presume or imply people who identify as LGBT are not also people of faith.

### **Avoid following a God vs. gay narrative**

Contrary to a frequently circulating myth, there is no conflict in the Bible that exists between God and LGBT people.

### **Avoid the use of outdated or pejorative terminology**

See "Terms to Avoid."

# Story Ideas



## Mississippi businesses who support the LGBT community

After Mississippi's Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) was passed by its legislature in 2014, numerous businesses joined the "If You're Buying, We're Selling" campaign to support the LGBT community and pledge equal treatment. Take time to share with your audience why these businesses found it important to support LGBT customers.



## Explore the stories of LGBT youth

LGBT youth in Mississippi are incredibly resilient and optimistic but can still face harassment and bullying at school. Work with organizations such as the Mississippi Safe Schools Coalition to profile the need for statewide anti-bullying measures that protect LGBT students. Consult ACLU of Mississippi guide "[Advocating for LGBT Student Rights in the Mississippi Delta Resource Guide](#)" to learn about the experiences and needs of LGBT young adults in the Magnolia State.



## Explore how faith communities and the LGBT community intersect

Though the media regularly portrays them in opposition, faith communities and the LGBT community often overlap in positive and interesting ways. Speak with LGBT people about their faith journeys, allies of faith about their journeys to LGBT acceptance, and faith leaders who minister to the LGBT community.



## Adoption

Mississippi passed a ban on same-sex adoption in 2000, and in 2015, was the only state to still enforce such a ban. Former Governor Ronnie Musgrove, who signed the ban into law, has since announced that his views have evolved and that the ban should no longer be recognized. Earlier in 2015, four Mississippi same-sex couples, along with the Campaign for Southern Equality and the Family Equality Council, filed a lawsuit against the ban. That lawsuit is still pending at the time of this writing.



## Explore the experiences of LGBT individuals in Mississippi who are living with HIV

The criminalization of HIV and AIDS complicates the experiences of HIV-positive members of the LGBT community. Tell their stories in a way that is humanizing and raises awareness about the discrimination they face.



## Explore the experiences of LGBT individuals living on military bases in Mississippi

The military can be a difficult place for LGBT people to live their authentic lives. Ask about both the joys and the challenges of serving in the military as an openly LGBT individual.



## Focus on the activism of the communities of color in Mississippi

Much of the coverage and storytelling around the LGBT community has centered on the experiences of gay white men. As a result, the experiences and advocacy of communities of color are often underreported. Be sure to recognize the achievements and experiences of LGBT people of color.



## Focus on the activism of the transgender community in Mississippi

The transgender community in the South is prolific in activism and it is important to highlight both the accomplishments that they have brought about and the struggles that they face.



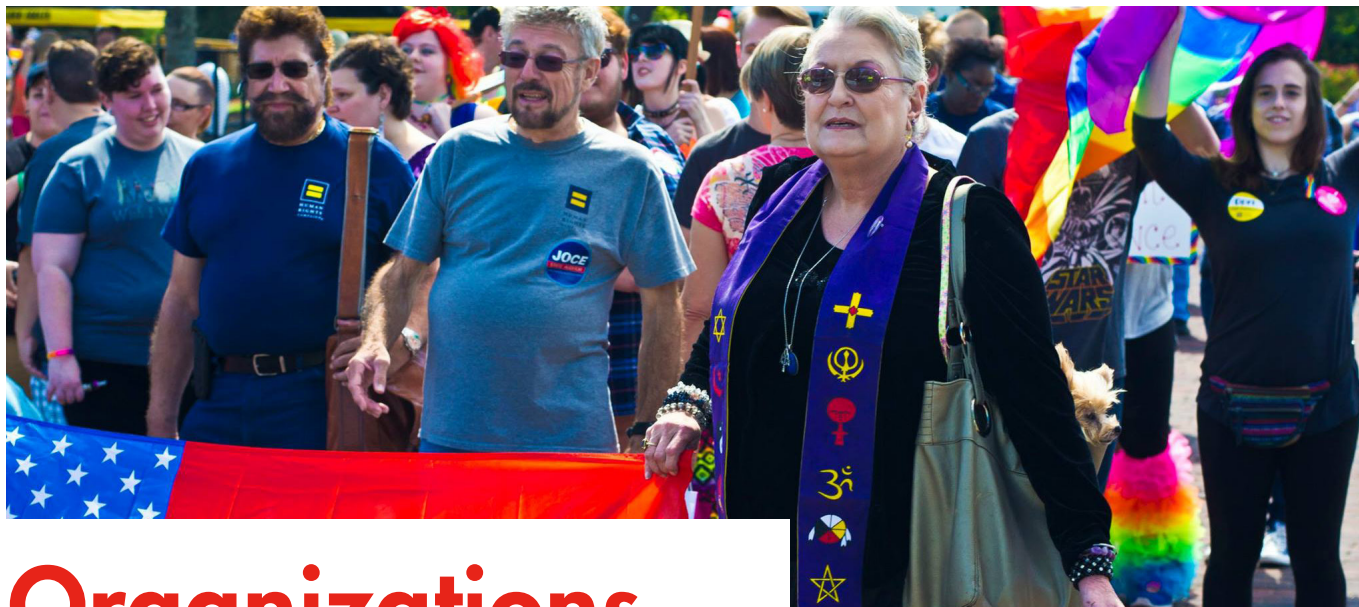
## Explore the stories of LGBT people raising children

Mississippi has the highest proportion of LGBT couples raising children of any state in the U.S. LGBT parents face significant income inequality compared to different-sex parents and are two to three times as likely to live at or under the federal poverty threshold.<sup>52</sup> Highlight the stories of these parents and their children, the barriers they face to full equality, and the joys of the family life they have created.



## Explore the experiences of youth affected by anti-LGBT sentiment

Anti-LGBT sentiment in families, foster homes, communities at large can result in youth living out-of-home. Work with LGBT youth organizations such as Rise Above for Youth to profile youth affected by these challenges and the lives they construct in response.<sup>52</sup>



# Organizations

## Jackson

ACLU of Mississippi  
P.O. Box 2242  
Jackson, MS 39225  
aclu-ms.org

Jackson Black Pride  
P.O. Box 4682  
Jackson, MS 39296  
jacksonblackpride.org

The PRISM Center  
(662) 471-8647  
Contact: Todd Allen  
facebook.com/RainbowCenterJxn

Unity Mississippi  
P.O. Box 4212  
Jackson, MS 39296  
unityms.org

MS Safe Schools Coalition  
P.O. Box 3442  
Jackson, MS  
mssafeschools.org

Rise Above for Youth  
5260 Cedar Park Drive, Suite A  
Jackson, MS 39206  
riseabove4youth.org

Open Arms Healthcare Center  
500 East Woodrow Wilson Suite M.  
Jackson, MS 39216  
oahcc.org

## Gulfport

Mississippi Gulf Coast Rainbow Center  
P.O. Box 1892  
Gulfport, MS 39502  
gulfcoastrainbowcenter.org

## Hattiesburg

The Spectrum Center  
210 South 25th Ave.  
Hattiesburg, MS  
thespectrumcenterms.org

USM Gay Straight Alliance  
P.O. Box 5037  
Hattiesburg, Mississippi 39406  
facebook.com/USMGSA

## Laurel

PFLAG Laurel  
2134 Highway 29 N  
Ellisville, MS 39347  
pflaglaurelms.wordpress.com

The Dandelion Project  
1423 Willus Dr.  
Laurel, MS 39440  
thedandelionproject.org

## Oxford

GetEQUAL MS  
facebook.com/GetEQUAL.MS  
getequal.org/mississippi.html

PFLAG Oxford  
662-816-2142  
P.O. Box 2142  
Oxford, MS 38655  
pflagoxfordms@gmail.com

## Tupelo

PFLAG Tupelo  
608 W Jefferson St.  
Tupelo, MS 38804  
pflagtupelo.org



# GLAAD's Assistance

For more information, help, and guidance, please contact GLAAD. We can put you in contact with organizations and spokespeople, and provide resources, facts, and ideas to tell the stories of LGBT people living in the U.S. South.



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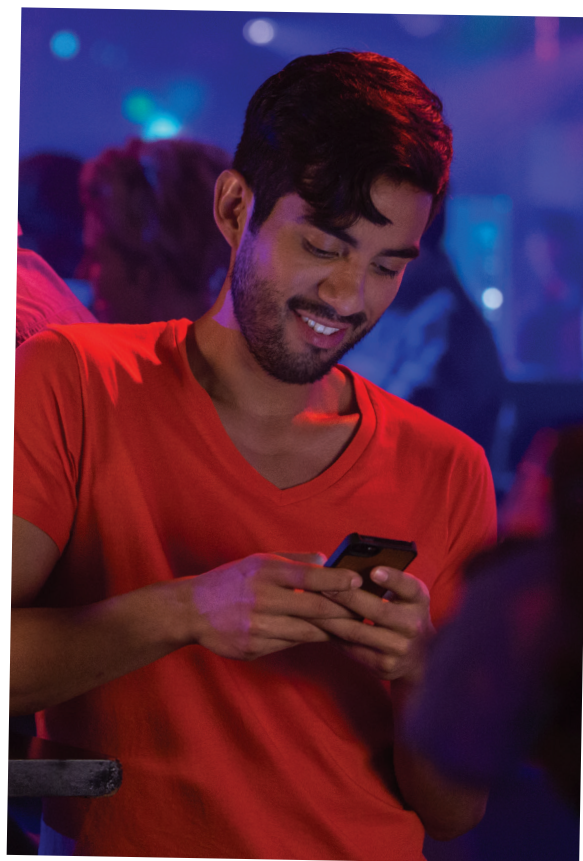
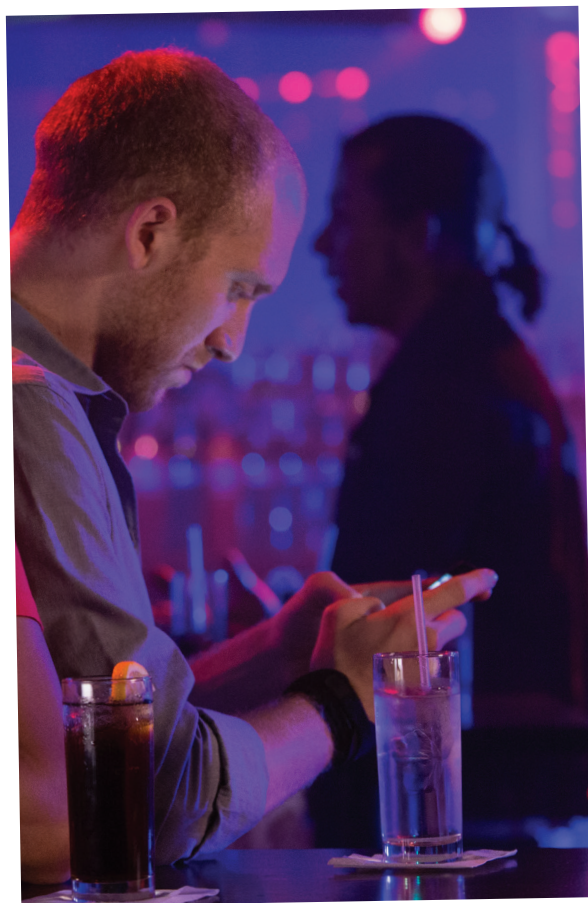
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ACLU MS  
The Dandelion Project  
The Spectrum Center



# Talk

can be the perfect foreplay.



Protect yourself and your partner. Talk about **testing**, your **status**, **condoms**, and new options like **medicines** that prevent and treat HIV. Get the facts and tips on how to start the conversation at [cdc.gov/ActAgainstAIDS/StartTalking](http://cdc.gov/ActAgainstAIDS/StartTalking).

**Start Talking. Stop HIV.**



Follow us online at:  [facebook.com/StartTalkingHIV](https://facebook.com/StartTalkingHIV)

 [@TalkHIV](https://twitter.com/TalkHIV)



GLAAD rewrites the script for LGBT acceptance. As a dynamic media force, GLAAD tackles tough issues to shape the narrative and provoke dialogue that leads to cultural change. GLAAD protects all that has been accomplished and creates a world where everyone can live the life they love.

[glaad.org](http://glaad.org)  
[facebook.com/glaad](https://facebook.com/glaad)  
[@glaad](https://twitter.com/glaad)



Americans' attitudes and behavior on LGBT equality are not just influenced by what they see and hear, but who they know. GLAAD's Southern Stories initiative tells the stories of LGBT people and their allies in the South to create a cultural shift towards LGBT acceptance and understanding in the region.

[glaad.org/southernstories](http://glaad.org/southernstories)  
[#SouthernStories](https://twitter.com/SouthernStories)