

from the front page

**MEMORIAL**

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Their story just always felt too close to home. I never met her, but the tears are always just a blink or two away when I hear her name.

So I asked Mom if she would be all right coming with me to Pulse, which is now filled with hundreds of artistic tributes created by members of the community who also are still grieving.

Mom acquiesced. I knew she would. After all, it was she who taught me the importance of facing my feelings — even the heat of anger or sting of sadness.

On the drive toward Orlando's largest scar, I described the community-built memorial and how to this day, people leave all kinds of handmade mementos.

But ask anyone who passes Pulse routinely, and they'll confirm what still touches me most: no matter the hour, the day or the weather — there is always at least one visitor here.

Lighting a candle, wiping a tear, humming a song, reflecting in silence.

Sure enough, as we arrived, eight people were already on site.

"It's been almost a year, and they still come?" Mom asked.

They still come. The message that rang out across Lake Eola last year still echoes here today: love is love is love.

I walked to a picture of McCool.

As I suspected, she wasn't forgotten. Someone, had left fresh flowers for her — Mother's Day flowers.

I hugged my Mom. I hugged her tight.

And then, I realized something that made me angry.

The others had left, and there was no one here.

After all the bragging I'd done to my mother about how there's always someone here manning the lighthouse, helping ships cut through the



Joe Burbank | The Associated Press  
**Runners Randa Black, left, and Elizabeth Anne-Noles cry after stopping in front of the Pulse nightclub during the 4.9K road race Saturday in Orlando.**

darkness, no one remained. My city let me down, and the thought cut deep.

Not even a year had gone by, and my neighbors were ready to move on?

What had happened to Orlando United, Orlando Strong?

As my mother and I prepared to leave, a family of five approached.

Slowly, the realization hit me.

It was us. It had been our turn to stand sentinel.

Poems, paintings, flags, flowers, candles ... they can say a lot about a city.

But it's people showing up that defines a community.

It's a familiar act of love that I have seen so many times here in The Villages.

Whenever a neighbor falls, Villagers gather to help them rise again.

Someone is always standing ready.

Sometimes, it can even be people who work here, like me.

I felt stupid for ever losing faith in my city — the City Beautiful.

Before we left, I looked at the flowers someone had left for McCool.

I know she was loved, perhaps as much as the city is loved.

But definitely, as much as I love my own mother. And love always wins.

**Love Conquers Hate, Love Conquers Darkness, Love Conquers All**

A few months after the Pulse nightclub massacre, I was watching "West Side Story" and began to cry.

"There's a place for us, a time and place for us..."

For me and other young members of the LGBT community, Pulse was that kind of haven.

If a place so special could be assaulted so mercilessly, what do we have left?

It has been 48 years since the Stonewall Riots.

It has been 19 years since Matthew Shepard was beaten, tortured, and left to die.

It has been 13 years since Massachusetts first legalized same-sex marriage.

It has been six years since the end of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

It has been two years since the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage for all Americans.

And it has now been a year since the worst attack ever unleashed against the LGBT community.

When, where will we find that time and place for us?

I hadn't been to Pulse for two years, but I went back last month on a warm Sunday afternoon.

That day, as has been the case every day for the past year, there was a constant stream of people.

People who were looking at the signs, the writings on the walls, the makeshift memorials in honor of the victims.

A group speaking in Portuguese...

A father and his young daughter...

A family with a teenage boy, quietly taking pictures...

It was painfully hard to reconcile the ashes of this place with the venue once so safe for LGBT people like me.

Coming from a small town in South Florida, my move to Orlando five years ago opened the doors to a community that



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has embraced me — a community I'm proud to belong to.

As a Latina woman, I felt an additional kinship to the victims, 90 percent of whom were Hispanic.

My sister lost a 22-year-old co-worker that day. She had only known him for a few months, but she remembers him as a kind person who took her shyness in stride and helped her meet new people.

Just one of four dozen tragic stories.

And yet, in the sorrow lies a reminder that humanity is beautiful.



Louis Brems | Daily Sun

**Kim Richards, of Orlando, kisses the cheek of Steve Lee, at a candlelight vigil for the Pulse nightclub victims last year at Lake Eola.**

The region came together in hourslong lines to donate blood and in massive vigils to pay respect.

We came together, we mourned, we began to heal. We persevered.

I left the memorial in Orlando and met up in The Villages with members of the Rainbow Family

and Friends Club.

They were line dancing on a balmy evening at a country club, all joy and kindness and inclusion.

There's a time for us, there's a place for us. It is today.

And it is wherever we stand united in love.

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