

How a picnic became Medford's first Pride celebration

By **Pola Galie** - 07/22/2026



Pola Galie is one of the organizers of Medford's first officially sanctioned Pride celebration.

It started the way a lot of good ideas do — with four friends playing trivia at a brewery.

Our little group didn't look like the beginning of a movement. It looked like friends sharing a beer and solving trivia questions. A gay couple, a transgender woman and an ally. It almost sounds like the beginning of a bad joke, but we're family.

Are you looking for a new primary care physician?

Meet **Dr. Thomas Ziering**, a board-certified concierge physician and former director, educator, and national speaker on LGBTQ+ medicine who has been caring for all families for more than 30 years.



Call (908) 838-9905 or visit ccphp.net/tomziering for more information

- Same or next-day extended appointments
- Comprehensive and sick visits
- 24/7 Connectivity
- Personal health coaching
- Fluency in transgender and queer health, PEP and PREP
- Quality and thorough healthcare — with visits up to one hour

We met at the brewery my family owns, a place where everyone is welcome. Somewhere between the trivia questions and conversations, we found ourselves talking about the future — what we wished our community could become and whether there was anything, however small, we could do to help. We weren't looking to change the world. We believed

that education, kindness, visibility and simply being ourselves could make a difference.

During the winter of 2026, those conversations turned to LGBTQ Pride. Medford isn't necessarily known for embracing diversity, and while there had never been an organized Pride event in town, we wondered if that could change. We also knew June is packed with Pride celebrations throughout New Jersey, making it difficult for people to attend yet another event.

So, we came up with a simple idea. Let's have a picnic.

Nothing elaborate. Just friends and family gathering in a local park sometime in July. A covered-dish meal, conversation, laughter and simply being present. Visibility doesn't always have to be loud.



But ideas have a way of growing. As we started making plans, someone asked, "What if we did something bigger?"

That simple question changed everything

"Bigger" meant permits, insurance, fundraising, entertainment, volunteers, logistics and meetings. We approached the Main Street Merchants of Historic Medford Village, whose support of community events made them a natural partner. With encouragement from the merchants, my family's brewery and several township administrators, we applied for a permit to host what would become the first officially sanctioned Medford Pride celebration.



The original four of us soon became a larger organizing committee. Sponsors stepped forward, helping us bring in musicians and performers. Vendors and service providers signed on. Volunteers offered their time. Little by little, our "picnic" evolved into a community festival.

None of us really knew what it would look like. What we did know was how we wanted people to feel.

We wanted families to feel welcome. We wanted people to learn about local organizations and resources. We wanted music, laughter, food and entertainment. We wanted people who had never attended a Pride event to discover that it was simply neighbors gathering together in celebration and support. Overall, we wanted to promote inclusion.

In the spirit of inclusion, one decision that meant a great deal to me was having volunteer American Sign Language interpreters throughout the event. If we were asking people to come exactly as they are, we also had a responsibility to make the event as accessible as we could. Watching the interpreters work alongside the performers was another reminder that inclusion takes intention.

Holding the event at Freedom Park felt especially meaningful. The name wasn't lost on any of us. Neither was the responsibility that came with organizing an event centered on inclusion, respect and acceptance.

As the date approached, we weren't sure what to expect. First-year events are always uncertain. We knew there were people planning to protest, but we also knew we had prepared thoughtfully. The township provided a police presence, our volunteers were ready, and our focus never changed. We weren't there to argue. We were there to celebrate.

Then the day arrived

The day was brutally hot, with heat advisories in effect, but the stage went up, vendors unloaded their tents, service organizations set up their tables, and Freedom Park slowly transformed into exactly what we had imagined.

Councilman Ray Coxe read a proclamation from the Township Council recognizing the occasion. New Jersey State Assemblyman Anthony Angelozzi presented members of the organizing committee with citations from the New Jersey Legislature. Throughout the evening, families wandered from booth to booth, children danced to the music, people stopped to learn about community resources, and old friends embraced while new friendships were formed.

Of course, no celebration would be complete without drag performers, whose joy, talent and generosity helped make the evening unforgettable.

What surprised me most wasn't that LGBTQ+ people came. I expected that. What surprised me was how many neighbors, families with young children, faith leaders, local officials, and people who had simply heard about the event decided to spend a hot July evening together. They didn't all come for the same reasons, but they left having shared the same space. Sometimes that's where community begins.

By the end of the evening, we estimated that nearly 1,300 people had attended. Numbers tell only part of the story.

What I'll remember most isn't the attendance or the speeches. It's the hugs.

The hugs from people who thanked us for creating a place where they felt safe. The hugs from parents. From allies. From friends I hadn't seen in years. From complete strangers. Everywhere I turned, there were smiles, conversations and people who simply seemed happy to be together.

It reminded me that our original idea hadn't really changed at all.

We never stopped planning a family picnic.

Our family just turned out to be much larger than we ever imagined.

Pola Galie

Pola Galie is one of the organizers of Medford's first officially sanctioned Pride celebration, which took place July 15. Galie and her family own Lower Forge Brewery in town, and she is affectionately known as "Beer Mom."