According to the Williams Institute at UCLA, more than 55% of America’s LGBTQ+ population lives in the Midwest and American South.

*“The LGBT Divide.” The LGBT Divide | Williams Institute, williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/lgbtdivide/#/ethnicity.

This was surprising to learn, even as someone from the South. So, I spent some time “exploring” these regions. By exploring I mean interviewing people on Zoom.
I grew up in Edmond, Oklahoma, your typical American suburb. When I came out as gay my senior year of high school, I knew I wasn’t alone (my school had a thriving Gay-Straight Alliance). But, I couldn’t see a future for myself. I didn’t know any gay folks much older than I was. So, I used this opportunity to talk with people from the Midwest and a bit of the South. To really connect with the queer community that exists in my home region. After speaking with different non-profits, event planners, and community organizers, I realized the place I’m from is even gayer than I thought.

Here are a few of the organizations and individuals I spoke with:
OUR MISSION:
Project Fierce Chicago seeks to create affirming transitional housing for LGBTQIA+ youth in Chicago that is responsive to the needs of young people. By mobilizing our communities, we provide pathways to independence.

OUR VISION:
We envision a future where all youth have access to safe and affirming housing and the support and opportunities to achieve their goals. We believe in the power of collective action and community accountability. When youth thrive, communities thrive.

From www.projectfiercechicago.com

“We have to come up with a model that is sustainable and can bring these kids into a safe place. Who’s going to stand up for them?”

- Daniel Rubin, Project Fierce Board Member
I spoke with Daniel Rubin, a Project Fierce board member who has been working with the non-profit since February 2020. He explained that the organization is founded on the core tenants of harm reduction and transformative justice. Its goal is to create a safe short or long term housing facility for at risk youth.

The focus of establishing a brick and mortar institution has yet to be achieved due to some organizational restructuring and the global pandemic, but Rubin affirmed that even though Project Fierce is in a moment of transition and reorganization the group is by no means gone. “Project Fierce remains committed to LGBTQ+ youth in Chicago,” he said, “There’s a lot of underserved youth right now who are suffering because there’s not many places for them to go, and there’s a pandemic that’s putting people, especially Black and brown people, at risk.”

Rubin believes a large issue facing unhoused LGBTQ+ youth lies in the fact that not enough organizations that offer resources 24/7. With Project Fierce, he envisions establishing a sustainable and always-accessible safe space. “We have to make sure that these kids have access to a place where they can trust adults, deal with the traumas they’ve been through, and redirect their mindset around trusting that they have a community, a family, that will take care of them and foster their hopes and dreams,” he said. While Rubin and his fellow board members work on plans to purchase a house, Project Fierce is funding sponsees and dispersing money into local organizations all in the hopes of helping queer youth in any way possible.
In 1974, the first National Women’s Music Festival was held on the campus of the University of Illinois at Champaign–Urbana in response to the underrepresentation of women in the music industry. After many years and multiple location changes, the organization expanded to include dances, women’s film festivals, and other events promoting women’s art and culture, and is now known as Women In the Arts, a non-profit organization whose purpose is to produce and sponsor programs that promote and affirm the creative talents and technical skills of women in the visual, performing, and fine arts. The primary vehicle to meet this purpose continues to be the National Women’s Music Festival.

from www.nwmf.info
Mary Spillane began working with the National Women’s Music Festival in the 90s, and was admitted onto its board in the mid-2000s. “What got me there first was the music,” she said, “I was involved in a lot of civil rights and protests movements back then, there was a lot of political action.”

The festival, located in Middleton, WI, was not originally founded specifically for the LGBTQ community. During the progressive feminist movements of the 1970s it was created as an alternative to a men’s folk festival that didn’t allow women. However, in the words of Spillane, “it’s grown to be very lesbian identified, and women who are used to living in the minority are now the majority.” As time passed, the festival became even more inclusive despite discourse arising in the lesbian community about the sanctity of women-only spaces. “Back then, there were a lot of issues about trans women, but we are and always have been open to everyone, including men...though they very rarely choose to come, except the occasional hippie guy,” she explained.

In a typical festival week, a crew of about 70 people from all across the United States arrive to help set up the venue. When the festival’s doors open, live music performances, drum choruses, and keynote speakers are accompanied by a marketplace and various workshops whose themes range from grassroots political organizing to making vagina cupcakes. There’s even an immersive meditative space called The Red Tent. In 2019, the festival premiered an orchestral work commissioned specifically for the event.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 crisis prevented the festival from being held in 2020. “The decision was made for us, the county can’t have more than 10 people in a gathering,” said Spillane, “but a lot of people count on this as a time to get together, and a lot of artists are gig workers and people count on this for income.” Despite the difficulties of the pandemic, Spillane and her fellow board members are looking towards the festival’s future. “There are people on the board in their 70s, so we’ve been trying to take on some younger women and let them shadow us,” she said, “Longevity beyond the 50th anniversary is going to require people to step up.”

Due to Covid-19, the 2020 festival has been canceled.

Save the Date for 2021!
The 2021 National Women’s Music Festival
the 45th — July 1-4, 2021
Marriott Madison West Hotel and Conference Center.
1313 John Q. Hammons Dr., Middleton, WI 53562
You don’t have to leave your state if you don’t want to, there’s a place for you. It might not be where you grew up, but it could be close by.

- Alex Wade
Medical Services Coordinator

OkEq seeks equal rights for LGBTQ+ individuals and families through intersectional advocacy, education, programs, alliances, and the operation of the Dennis R. Neill Equality Center.

Serving LGBTQ+ Oklahomans and their allies since 1980, Oklahomans for Equality is home to a diverse, vibrant, and engaged community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons, knowledgeable staff, and dedicated volunteers.

In the 1980s, OkEq sponsored several high-profile social events for the LGBT and allied community, operated a speakers bureau, launched the first gay pride picnic and sponsored the nationally known Southwest Invitational softball tournament. With the advent of HIV/AIDS, OkEq sent medical professionals to health conferences to return and advise the community on the transmission of the virus. OkEq then opened Northeast Oklahoma’s first anonymous HIV testing clinic, becoming a state leader in HIV/AIDS testing and education. In 1998, H.O.P.E. (Health Outreach, Prevention & Education) became a separate nonprofit organization. Today, OkEq and H.O.P.E. continue their partnership with health testing.

OkEq opened Oklahoma’s first LGBT Community Center in October 1996. In October 2005, OkEq purchased an 18,000-square-foot facility to serve as a permanent home for the community. The Dennis R. Neill Equality Center opened on Jan. 23, 2007.

from www.okeq.org
It might seem surprising that OkEq, located in the Dennis R. Neill Equality Center in Tulsa, is the seventh largest LGBTQ+ center in the United States. Alex Wade started volunteering there in 2015 and now operates as the non-profit’s Medical Services Coordinator. Wade admitted that Oklahoma is not the most LGBTQ+ friendly state, but he believes the Center’s existence in downtown Tulsa gives people hope. “The thing that has the most direct impact on people is simply being a place where people can go and exist as themselves,” said Wade, “They may never come into the building, they may never come to a program, but they see that we’re here, and if they do come we always try to tell people ‘welcome home, we’ve been expecting you.’”

The organization hosts a variety of programs in the community center for queer people of all ages, they also provide educational workshops for local businesses, collaborate with healthcare providers, and do general outreach in the Tulsa and Oklahoma community. “We need to branch out to make those other places feel as safe as the community center,” said Wade.

When the organization started out it was primarily made up of gay men, then gradually lesbians joined, then transgender people. Wade knows that the LGBT community is not a monolith, and OkEq provides different resources to positively impact the diverse members in Oklahoma’s queer community. “There’s always going to be tension where people don’t get each other, but we’re starting to understand those intersections and work towards all being one team,” he said, “and this summer, we’re working with Black Lives Matter protest organizers, we’re supporting those trying to address ICE’s presence in Tulsa, we’ve tried to expand our vision of ‘what is an LGBT issue?’”

OkEq is a vital part of the Oklahoma queer community largely due to its unique educational approach to addressing these LGTB+ issues. “Whenever we go to national conferences, we see people giving advice about what we as a movement need to be doing, but as people who live in a very red state in an area where there’s a church on every corner, those tactics aren’t going to work here,” said Wade, “I get a lot of pushback on this because our education programming comes from a place of empathy rather than saying ‘you should already know this.’ I will never get offended by something that someone says as long as they want to learn,” said Wade.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many centers like OkEq have closed due to a lack of support from the state and federal government. “If we aren’t getting the support of our local people we cannot survive,” said Wade, “Oklahoma is unique, we have a very generous population, but nobody was prepared for what this was going to look like. We don’t know what the future is going to hold after this.” For the time being, Wade and the volunteers who help run the Center are hosting online history nights, trans support groups, sobriety groups, and programming for queer Black folks. “Our community is the biggest part, and making sure we are connecting and coming together is really hard over the phone or over Zoom,” said Wade, “but we have to make sure we are being safe.”

This dedication to Oklahoma’s community of queer folks and their allies is something that might go unrecognized amongst Wade’s peers from other parts of the country. “I was at a conference once and we were going around the room saying where we were from,” he remembered, “when I said ‘I’m from Oklahoma’ someone said ‘Ew.’ I get it, most of what we’re in the news for are things our politicians are doing that are not great, but there are pockets that are safe, and that are welcoming. I think a lot of young LGBT people think they have to move to different cities and different states to feel like they have a sense of community, and that doesn’t have to be true.”