

A Place at the

Table

Created at a time when the town was divided, CAMP Rehoboth marks 25 years as an integral — and edifying — part of the community

BY PAM GEORGE | PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT NATHAN

The summer of 2015 started with a bang. Police issued citations for public alcohol consumption on Poodle Beach, a longtime gathering spot for gays, prompting some to claim that they were being unfairly targeted. There was also an unsuccessful attempt to restrict swimming pool use on rental properties, mostly due to noise concerns.

In cases like those, Steve Elkins would like to see all concerned parties “brought to the table” to discuss the issues and suggest solutions. Twenty-five years ago, however, he wouldn’t have received an invitation to enter the meeting room, let alone be offered a seat at any such table.

Elkins is the co-founder of CAMP Rehoboth, founded back then to bring gay and straight community stakeholders together to create a safe, welcoming environment for everyone who appreciates the area. “I always found that you could accomplish much more when you look at what you have in common rather than look at your differences,” he says.

CAMP Rehoboth leaders, from left, Chris Beagle, Murray Archibald, Steve Elkins and Salvatore Seeley gather in the CAMP courtyard on Baltimore Avenue.





Celebrating the July 2009 signing of the law that added sexual orientation to the list of prohibited discriminatory practices in Delaware are, from left: Steve Elkins of CAMP Rehoboth, state Rep. Pete Schwartzkopf, Drew Fennell of the Delaware ACLU, Gov. Jack Markell and state Sen. Dave Sokola.

Although it might sound a tad utopian to skeptics — or a relic from the hippie counterculture — CAMP Rehoboth's approach has worked. A quarter-century after the organization's founding, the LGBT community not only has a voice in Rehoboth, but policymakers — some of whom are themselves gay — are listening. "Today, we're equal partners," Elkins says. And that, he adds, is one of CAMP's greatest accomplishments.

There have been many achievements throughout that 25-year history, from raising awareness about AIDS and HIV-prevention to lobbying for anti-discrimination legislation and same-sex marriage to conducting sensitivity training for police officers.

CAMP Rehoboth (the half-acronym name stands for "Create A More Positive Rehoboth") is the brainchild of Elkins and partner Murray Archibald, who became concerned about the backlash against the growing gay population in 1990, when bumper stickers stating "Keep Rehoboth a Family Town" — perceived as an anti-gay slogan — began appearing on cars around the city. "So many more gays were coming to town and spending the summer here, and each summer they were more and more out in the open," Archibald recalls.

It was a different — and for some, a more threatening — time. The Strand, a predominately gay disco on Rehoboth Avenue, was two years old, and The Renegade, another dance club just outside town that catered to a gay clientele, was in full swing. "We were getting a lot of pushback," says Archibald, who came up with the idea for CAMP Rehoboth — or CAMP,

for short — while sitting in his artist studio. "We needed a place for mediation to negotiate concerns." He and Elkins founded the organization to improve relations between residents, tourists, merchants, politicians and police.

The nonprofit has gone from a one-person staff with an annual budget of less than \$50,000 to a staff of seven with an annual budget that tops \$1 million. (The funding comes from private donations, fundraising events, advertising revenue from the *Letters From CAMP Rehoboth* publication, and an annual membership campaign that brings in more than \$250,000 a year. The organization also has a \$108,000 contract with the state for HIV/AIDS programming.) CAMP has grown from a tiny office on Baltimore Avenue, where everyone bumped elbows, into a community center complex with a library, conference rooms, galleries, a multipurpose room that can hold nearly 180 people, a kitchen and a courtyard. *Letters*, published 15 times a year, has grown from four pages per issue to more than 120.

Ahead of CAMP's "Silverbration Celebration Weekend," which includes a "Silver Gala" on Friday, Oct. 9, and a "Silver Block Party" on Sunday, Oct. 11, *Delaware Beach Life* talked to Elkins, who became executive director in 1993 when the first director left; Archibald, president of the board; Salvatore Seeley, the program director of CAMPSafe (an HIV/AIDS prevention program) and manager of the organization's health and wellness programs; and Chris Beagle, vice president of the board, who started volunteering at CAMP in 2006.

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(Interviews were edited for flow and brevity.)

What were the challenges facing CAMP in 1990?

Archibald: The first step was to organize a group, and we did a workshop at The Strand, [the back of which] was across the street from where we are now [37 Baltimore Ave.]. We got a lot of good ideas and moved forward with getting our [nonprofit status] and writing up the mission and goals. We had some advice, but no one had started an organization like the one we were talking about. The idea was to make Rehoboth a better community. Part of that included fundraising, networking. It also included artistic expression, education and outreach. We also talked about building a community space and building a complex. People were rolling their eyes and saying, "You can't put all those goals together."

We got *Letters From CAMP* started, so we had a means of communication. We got the board together. As we got 10 years into the organization, we started to talk about the property itself and the idea of expanding into a full community center. We grew into the vision, even when we didn't know that we were.

In 1993, when CAMP was still new, five men attacked three gay men on the boardwalk, leaving one with a permanent injury. How did that affect the organization?

Elkins: The chamber of commerce and city officials wanted to sweep it under the rug because it was negative publicity, that type of thing. I worked with then-Police Chief Creig Doyle, and we said: "We're not going to accept that. There might not be hate crime legislation that would cover this, but we're going to find a way to [get that enacted]." And he said he was going to treat it as though it were a hate crime. That forced the city officials, both business leaders and political leaders, to finally say, "You're right. Enough is enough."

[The culprits, three of whom were juveniles, received sentences of confinement or community service, although the adult who pleaded guilty and testified against the others got probation.]

That was a galvanizing point. It mobilized the community.

Delaware added sexual orientation to its hate crime law in 1997. What did that mean to you?

Elkins: It was one of the earliest times that I felt we'd made a difference. Gov. Thomas Carper chose to sign the hate crimes legislation in front of the police station in Rehoboth Beach, and he invited me to sit at the table while he did that. That was one of the proudest early achievements.

AIDS and HIV were also a primary focus in the early years. How have CAMP's health initiatives grown in the past 25 years?

Seeley: I was hired in 2000 to do the HIV-prevention program, which at that time was really just doing condom distribution in the bars and beach houses. It was primarily a summer program. Then I did some other stuff for CAMP — helping to answer the phones and filling in. I think there were four of us working in a space that was about 200 square feet. Over the years, [we moved] from condom distribution and outreach to also doing HIV testing and counseling and then sexual health counseling. It was exciting to be part of that.

More and more people were relocating here, and we were getting a lot more calls. "Where can I find a LGBT-friendly doctor — eye doctor, chiropractor, psychiatrist or regular practitioner?" I talked to Steve and we decided to look at health and wellness programs. I was going back to school for my licensed clinical social worker — my master's — degree. It became a perfect fit. I graduated, and that's when we started doing some more programs. We started a men's discussion

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group, a women's discussion group and a youth group. We put together a resource and referral guide for people calling in for doctors. We started offering a free mental health counseling program for people who had no insurance or who were under-insured.

This was in 2005, and things were happening quickly. We started building some great relationships with Beebe Healthcare and working with them on LGBT issues in the hospital. I sat on some committees to do sensitivity training and develop the first LGBT guidelines for patients.

When CAMP moved to a bigger building, we could do some health fairs and flu clinics with Beebe Healthcare. We had the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs] come in to talk to our gay vets about benefits.

When we started getting asked to sit on these committees for public health, Beebe and United Way, I said, "Wow, we're known throughout the state of Delaware." I've had tons of these "aha" moments. It's being invited to do workshops and lectures and give presentations at conferences ... and seeing other agencies using our [HIV awareness] materials or including our materials in their presentations. It's like, "Oh, my God, we are doing good work and meaningful work to reach our communities."

What about women's health? At one time, the stereotype was that CAMP was only for males.

Sealey: We do a lot more women's programs than men's programs, believe it or not. With our female community members in mind, we started [a volunteer program to help cancer patients



Kathy Wiz, a CAMP Rehoboth board member, speaks to the crowd gathered for the Broadwalk on the Boardwalk (an event intended to raise awareness of breast cancer). The walk was part of the nonprofit group's Women's FEST in April 2014.

who don't have family in the area. Volunteers give patients rides to treatment or do their grocery shopping.] It started with our female community members and now it's evolved to include men and women.

Chris, how did you get involved?

Beagle: I started volunteering at CAMP in 2006. I've been on the board since 2009. Advocacy has always been important to me

personally. One of the important things we do at CAMP is advocacy. The nondiscrimination legislation [was] first and then civil union and marriage — transgender rights. We really try to do everything we can.

On July 2, 2009, the governor of the state [Jack Markell] signed [legislation that outlaws discrimination based on a person's sexual orientation] at CAMP Rehoboth. At that time, efforts had been undertaken for nearly a decade to get it to that point. It says a lot about the impact CAMP Rehoboth has had on these efforts in the state to have him sign the bill there. It was momentous for a lot of us. Certainly something I'll never forget.

Equality Delaware approached CAMP Rehoboth to be a partner to mobilize efforts and volunteers throughout the state [for the civil union bill]. I remember when I testified [at Legislative Hall in Dover] for the civil union bill. There were testimonies for and testimonies against it. I was extremely proud to be in the group that testified for it. I sat there and looked up at the dome and thought: "Here I am, a scrawny, lonely kid from central Pennsylvania who never dreamed he'd be given the opportunity to speak for this legislation, this most important effort." I remember thinking at that moment: "I am no longer in the minority." As I've often said, I never considered myself a militant activist, so to speak, but I got involved in this first and foremost to have a voice for my husband, Eric, and I. We'll celebrate 26 years in September, and I'm only 49 years old. There are a lot of people who need a voice.

Given the recent racial tension the country has experienced, we know that discrimination doesn't stop once laws get passed. Is there still unrest when it comes to sexual discrimination?

Beagle: I was asked the day the Supreme Court decision came down [declaring that same-sex marriage was legal in all 50 states], what's next? I was so emotionally vested in that moment that I missed the opportunity to say that as wonderful as it is that any loving couple — regardless if they're the same sex or not — can now get married in this country, in a majority of states, you could still go to work on Monday and get fired for your sexual orientation. Having nondiscrimination protection is paramount to our community now. That's certainly where we need to focus our efforts in terms of priority. ►

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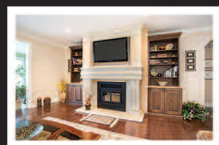
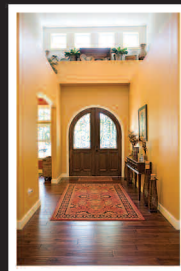
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Seeley: I think our transgender community here in Delaware is the next community that we need to work with to make sure discrimination doesn't exist in the workplace. We have laws here in Delaware, but there's still a lot of homophobia and transgender phobia that still does exist.

Even in the gay community, is there discrimination against transgender people?

Seeley: Yes. I think there is. Part of what we're trying to do now is start a new program for men and women who are transitioning and don't have the financial resources to get free clothing. There's still a lot of misunderstanding about where the transgender community fits in with the lesbian and gay community. Our job now is to alleviate some of those misconceptions and get information out there to our community so we don't discriminate in our own LGBT rainbow. The needs are so different.

How did transgender become part of the lesbian and gay umbrella?

Seeley: Way, way back in the 1960s, when the sexual revolution and the gay rights liberation movement started, everything got lumped into the lesbian-gay-bi-transgender rainbow. Now that Caitlyn Jenner has come out, people are starting to say: "OK, we've really neglected the 'T' in our community. How do we focus on providing resources and programming for that population?"

Archibald: [In March,] we had a transgender service honoring people all over the world who'd lost their lives [to transphobia]. It's one of those areas I think everybody has to work harder at — gay and straight.

Lumping LGBT together sounds nice, but there are still different groups. You can put people together in broad categories, but within those categories, people are as diverse as in the rest of the world. You might think all gay people are Democrats, but that's not true. There's a wide mix of political views, backgrounds and cultures. A lot of people live on their little edge of a circle and don't see what's on the other side of the circle. CAMP gets to interact with a full circle of people, who don't always know each other. Every one of those groups has an opinion on what CAMP should be and do. Finding the way to reach the most people is not an easy thing to do.



The CAMP Rehoboth logo represents the organization's mission to be "the heart of the community," according to co-founder Murray Archibald.

Many of us know about the Rehoboth Art League's space restrictions and its inability to expand on its Henlopen Acres site. The art league recently opened a satellite site on Route 9. You don't face the same zoning issues as the RAL, but is there a concern due to congestion downtown that you might need another location?

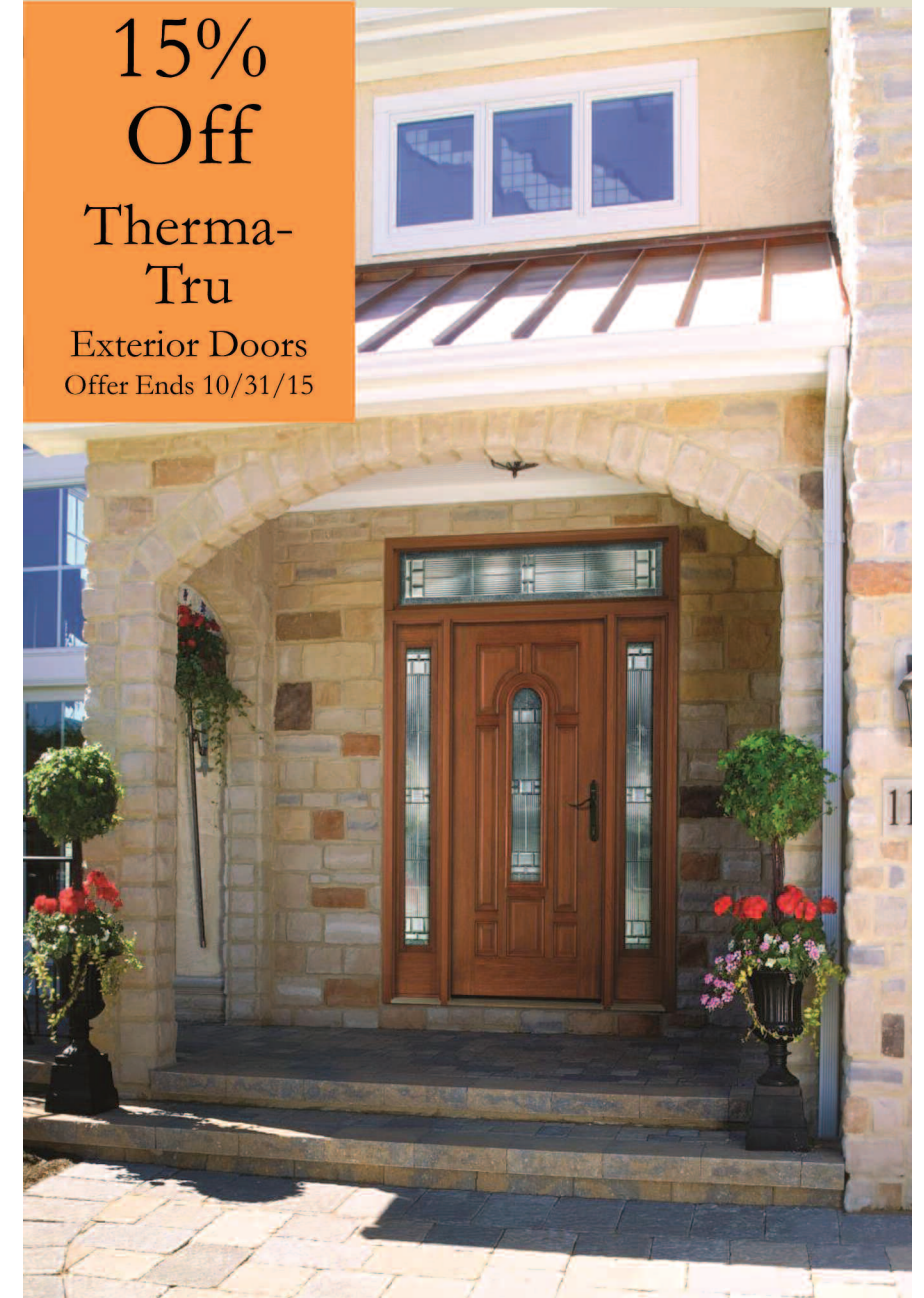
Elkins: It's challenging, but we made a decision back in 2000, when we bought 39 Baltimore — now we have 37 and 39 — and started plans to expand and have a community center, to have a stake here and be in the heart of the community. The decision was made and there was no turning back. We have no intention of having a satellite location. But we do work with other organizations, like the art league or film society or many other nonprofits in the area, to have satellite events or programs. The men's group meets every other week at Epworth United Methodist Church [just outside Rehoboth] because there's parking.

Our mission was to be the heart of the community — and make it be a safe and inclusive community — and we think we can do that by being part of downtown Rehoboth.

Archibald: The idea that came out of one of our early workshops was to be the heart of the community, and our logo has a house with a heart in it. It's all about creating a home or home away from home for anybody who needs it. People know they can call us for help, whether it's a gay issue or not, and we'll send them in the right direction. So many people in their work life might still be living in the closet, so we're a place they can turn to when they need it. >

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Do you think that younger people in the LGBT community realize what things were like in the 1990s, when CAMP was founded and how much has changed?

Elkins: Even when we were coming here as weekenders in the 1980s, we didn't stop to think that there's somebody doing all these things to make [Rehoboth] wonderful. I think the younger generation, as they get more mature and into their lifestyle, will start to realize it's not just magic. There's somebody behind the curtain who's worked to make it safe. Every once in a while the young people will come and say: "We really appreciate what you guys have done for us."

Beagle: I hope I live long enough to see a day when it's not a big deal and they don't understand what it was like because

The Gaying of Rehoboth

To read a comprehensive history of the evolution of the gay community in Rehoboth, buy a back issue of the October 2009 edition of *Delaware Beach Life* (or find it in local libraries). The story, titled "The Gaying of Rehoboth," was written by Fay Jacobs, who won an award for it in the public issues category of a national magazine-writing competition. Back issues are available at delawarebeachlife.com/shop/single-issues. ■

it would mean that we've come so far and they're treated equally in every facet of their life. My godson will be 15, and his outlook on the world is so different than ours was at that age. I'm thrilled for that. He's grown up watching his uncles, who've loved him for his entire life, and they're not abnormal. It's not wrong. It's not immoral. He just happens to have two uncles. Our mission at CAMP Rehoboth is to move forward for all of us. We certainly hope people have an appreciation, but ultimately, we want to see a world that's fair and equal for all of us. ■

PAM GEORGE, a frequent contributor to *Delaware Beach Life*, has also been published in *Fortune*, *US Airways Magazine*, *The Christian Science Monitor* and *Men's Health*.

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