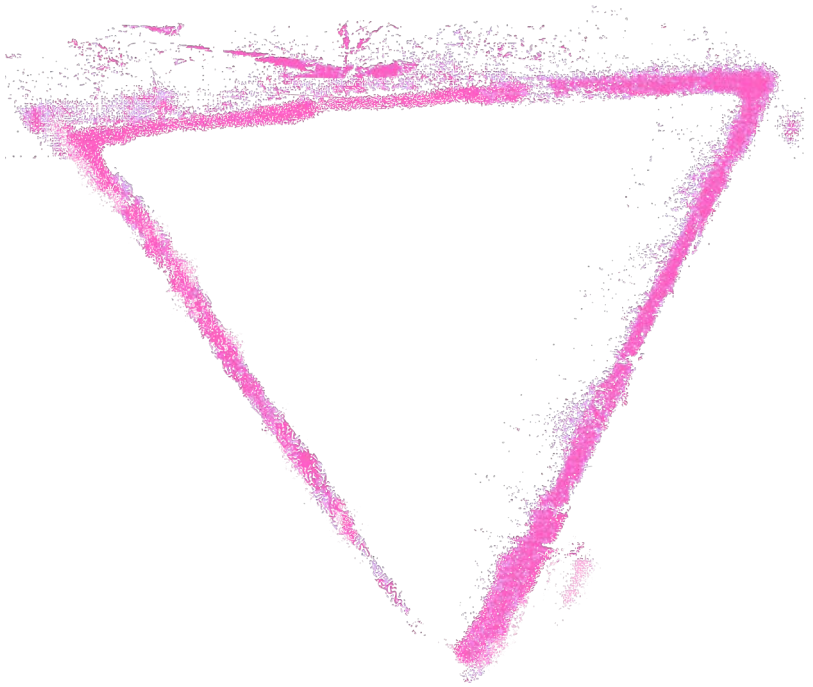




What will it take for Arizona's gay bars to stop overdoses? Pg. 17



LOOKOUT

LOOKOUT is a multi-disciplinary organization that's mission is to deliver fearless journalism, content, and events with the unified purpose of improving and expanding LGBTQ+ representation on the national news stage, and building strength and engaging LGBTQ+ communities (and their allies) in the queer experience.

Our vision is to inspire and hasten a queer experience that's liberated from injustice and delivers on the promise of equal respect, rights, and opportunity for all people — while also holding those who perpetuate queer domination to journalistic account.

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Letter from *LOOKOUT*'s Editor

When was the last time you saw yourself truly represented in local news?

I ask this question in earnest: From all the news coverage in the last year about trans bans, bathroom bills, pronouns, and pride flags, have you ever once seen yourself portrayed as fully human?

Our reality is this community is severely overlooked and unrepresented. We're seen as different in how we approach the world; We are not seen as a whole community with universal thoughts or experiences.

This is why we started *LOOKOUT* last November. We want to tell stories about what the LGBTQ+ community is going through, in their own words, showcasing their full experiences. Since we've started writing on LGBTQ+ issues across the state, we've been rewarded with an incredible amount of your trust bestowed upon us. It hasn't gone unnoticed or unappreciated.

People who have never trusted local news have told us they felt heard for the first time. Sources have thanked us for not treating them as just another sound bite. Other news outlets have taken notice, and subsequently started covering the stories we published.

Recently, I was a guest speaker on a panel discussion in Philadelphia. Among the guests speaking were other news leaders from around the nation: Reuters, *New York Times*, CNN, *Washington Post*, NBC, Disney...and then there was me, the only representative of local news.

In a crowded room of journalists and business people, the heads of these powerhouse news outlets spoke on the ever growing need to get the news right in the LGBTQ+ community. Then promptly gave themselves a pat on the back for their own coverage.

At one point, I rolled my eyes so hard that Jake Hylton, *LOOKOUT*'s executive director, sitting in the audience, signaled for me to ease up.

I rolled my eyes because the pats on their backs are unwarranted. Mainstream media is not meeting people where they're at. In the short amount of time *LOOKOUT* has been around, we've spoken with enough people—from Tucson to Flagstaff—who all say the same thing: We don't trust our local and national news to responsibly cover queer issues.

This is why it's so important we exist. Without *LOOKOUT* in the news landscape, more people will be forced to choose misinformation over vetted facts, rumor over expertise. They'll continue their resignation of not being seen. We know we haven't been able to do this alone. Your support in sharing *LOOKOUT* articles whenever you see them, championing our coverage, and engaging with your community has made us who we are today. And we know the more we can get others to do that, the larger impact we'll have.

We can do some much more and make bigger waves of change, so long as we stick together.

Thank you for reading *LOOKOUT* Magazine, I hope this issue brings you the same fire and joy it brought us in making it for you.

This magazine and all future issues are for you: a full human, represented.



Joseph Darius Jaafari
Editor in Chief, Founder



A teacher's road to acceptance, and fighting back against hate

River Chinnui is a nonbinary teacher in Peoria who has been at the center of anti-queer rhetoric. Now, they're making their voice heard.

STORY & PHOTOS BY Joseph Darius Jaafari (he/him)

On July 13 of this year, River Chinnui decided to do something they had never thought about before: stand in public at a school board meeting and tell their side of the story.

"I just was terrified," Chinnui said. "I was so scared."

For months, Chinnui, who is nonbinary and uses they and them pronouns, had been the target of fearmongering, specifically by two school board members in the district where they worked: Heather Rooks and Rebecca Hill.

Chinnui looked both Rooks and Hill in the eye, describing what it was like to be on the receiving end of a hate-filled campaign against gender identity.

"Let me be clear," Chinnui said. "The past year has been nothing short of two members of this very board lobbying against a subgroup of individuals and children simply because of who they are. This is the very definition of discrimination. And this discrimination, prejudice, transphobia and hatred for other—"

"Point of order," Hill interrupted. "Point of order. You're not allowed to call me transphobic. That's a slur."

Rooks came to Hill's defense, "Yes, if you could just please refrain from comments made against those—"

The crowd of a few dozen people screamed back: "Shame on you!"

The people had had enough.

Through social media posts and their known position on Peoria's Governing School Board, Rooks and Hill have attacked trans kids in schools and on sports teams. They have used religion to promote extremist ideologies in a public forum, garnering the attention of Turning Point USA, a far-right religious and political group that denounces the existence of trans people.

As the audience moaned in defiance, shrugged, and rolled their eyes, Rooks raised her voice: "Excuse me! If you continue, I will ask the officer in the back of the room to remove you."

Chinnui continued to address the room: "We have a moral responsibility to speak out against discrimination and injustice, even when those who commit such acts are in positions of power. The consequences of silence are too high for queer and trans students who already experience higher rates of depression and suicidal ideation. Our students, our children, are watching us and counting

on our voices."

Since coming out publicly at work two years ago, Chinnui, a special education teacher who has taught in Arizona for more than a decade, has been a target. Both local far-right elected officials and evangelical Christians called for Chinnui's termination online and during school board meetings.

In Arizona alone, state legislators have passed 12 bills to limit queer visibility in public and private spaces.

At first, Chinnui avoided the spotlight, fearful that speaking out would put their two daughters in harm's way. But violence eventually found them.

The stress of coming out and the hostility from



people they didn't even know became so unbearable that last November, Chinnui tried taking their own life.

Chinnui's experience is far from isolated. In interviews with dozens of students and staff across Maricopa County, *LOOKOUT* has learned that the experience for trans people attending (and working at) public schools has become tenuous, at best. It coincides with the spate of anti-queer rhetoric and legislation nationwide over the past year.

In Arizona alone, state legislators have passed 12 bills to limit queer visibility in public and private spaces. Although Gov. Katie Hobbs vetoed all of the legislation, it is cold comfort to people like Chinnui, who have been navigating public life in the middle of a one-sided culture war.

The most heated public debates are happening at school board meetings and public meetings in which religious groups and individuals are using scripture to shape public policy. Meetings like the one at which Chinnui spoke.

As a result, the increased harassment and false information said regarding LGBTQ+ issues in the meetings has resulted, anecdotally, in the rise of violence. Chinnui knows about this first-hand, with threatening emails and phone calls, car tires slashed on school grounds, and rock-smashed windows at home.

But with a new-found self-advocacy, Chinnui has decided to fight back and stand up against the same people who would rather see them—and others like them—go away.

THIS IS ME

Chinnui became a teacher more than a decade ago. Helping children learn about themselves and watching them grow is part of what makes the job so rewarding. But working with kids who have special needs is the personal fulfillment of a professional dream. In 2021, Chinnui secured the teaching job in Peoria they had always wanted.

"I was set on getting a job in Peoria at Desert Harbor," Chinnui said. "I knew the people that worked there, I knew the work that went into that school, and I knew that I could excel there."

Around that time, Chinnui was also on a personal journey. Words like "transgender" and "non-binary" were brand new to the cultural lexicon. For

Chinnui, these words were relatable, at last.

As a child, the idea of being a girl or a boy didn't compute with Chinnui. One night, their mother sat down with an anatomy coloring book and talked about the differences between boys and girls. When their mother wasn't looking, Chinnui grabbed a pair of scissors and began cutting and pasting body parts.

"This is me," Chinnui remembers saying to their mother, proudly. Their mother said it wasn't possible to be both.

That moment stuck with Chinnui their whole life, and made the transition to identifying as non-binary difficult, both personally and professionally. With two kids at home and being newly divorced from their husband, trying to solve personal issues with managing a new identity was too difficult a task to wrangle. Chinnui originally came out as a lesbian to test the waters.

But it wasn't enough because it wasn't fully true.

As the COVID pandemic settled, so did Chinnui's anxieties over the world's perception of them. That same year they got the job in Peoria, Chinnui came out as nonbinary to their boss.

At first, there was acceptance. When Chinnui asked if they could announce being nonbinary to the staff in an email, the principal, Chinnui said, shifted a bit.

"I don't know," Chinnui remembers the principal saying. "Let me talk to the district."

A few days later, they were authorized to send an email explaining their pronouns. It was then Chinnui took on the name "River" publicly.

"It felt so freeing," they said.

The students were unfazed. Chinnui explained that they would simply go by "Mx" instead of "Miss." There weren't any questions, no talk about genitals or the intricacies of gender dysphoria or class discussion on if girls are indeed just girls.

But Chinnui's announcement did not sit well with the school district.

A HISTORY OF INTOLERANCE

When Markus Cenicerros was in the eighth grade, his teacher hung a sign outside the classroom. He remembers it was a rainbow flag, and it meant one thing—that people like Cenicerros were safe.

The sign didn't appear randomly—it was there because members of the Littleton School District community in western Phoenix were unhappy with the presence of gay teachers and a gay principal, Ceniceros said.

Ceniceros, now 19, remembers the conversations the sign sparked in his school, that being gay wasn't OK, and it was an affront to God. A week after it went up, the sign was removed. The message to Ceniceros and his classmates was clear: They were not welcome.

"I don't want kids to have to go through what I went through," said Ceniceros, who now sits on a school board as one of the state's youngest elected LGBTQ+ individuals. He governs the same district where he once closeted himself, in Littleton. The rhetoric around queer people's existence in public has only heightened, he said.

This year, Ceniceros tried to push for a statement of support for queer kids during Pride month. He tried to bring up his own experience as a gay young boy in Arizona, and how there was immense fear and shame. It didn't get the votes.

Although his stories have shed light in school board discussions, they have not helped push the narrative that queer kids do exist, and that they need to feel welcome and safe when they enter a classroom.

"If we are leaders in learning, we have to learn from every student's experience," he said.

The Littleton School District is in Avondale, about 20 miles away from Peoria. The cultural climate and discussions around queer visibility are just as prevalent there as they are in Peoria, showing that the discussion has permeated almost every part of Phoenix's various education boards.

School boards from Gilbert to Glendale have experienced a wave of people showing up at meetings or town halls, using religion and conservative talking points to denounce the experiences of trans kids using public bathrooms or who can play in sports.

Last month, *LOOKOUT* published data that shows how in the Peoria Unified School District, religious words, such as "Jesus," "God," "church," or "Bible," were brought up at least 47 times during board meetings between February and August 2023 in an attempt to sway votes on agenda items related to LGBTQ+ issues.

These same people attempted to get Chinnui fired from their job for simply sending an email about an honorary national holiday.

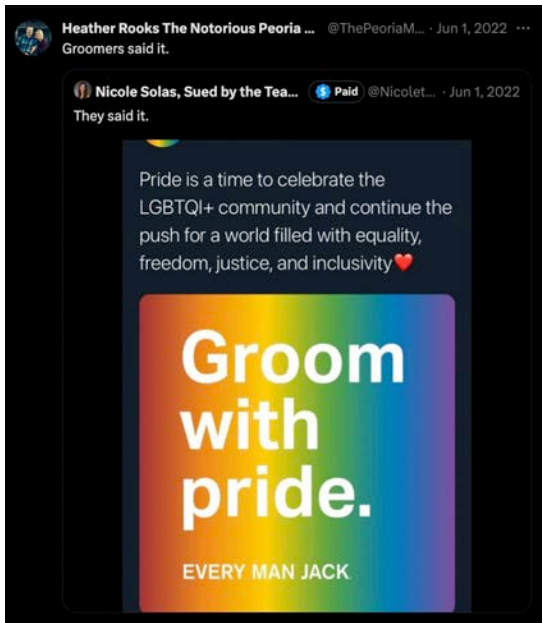
"I see you"

It was March 31, 2022, International Trans Day of Visibility.

When Chinnui arrived at work, they saw a handful of students congregating outside of the school dressed in teal, white, and pink, the colors of the transgender flag. (This year, President Joseph R. Biden released a statement proclaiming March 31 a national holiday honoring trans people.)

On the same day that the kids stood outside their school showing their pride, former Gov. Doug Ducey was miles away at the state Capitol and refused to acknowledge that trans people even existed. Instead, he doubled down on two bills he signed: one that banned gender-affirming care for youth, and another that banned trans girls and women to play in girls' high school sports.

"We have trans kids on our campus and in our



Peoria Unified School Board Governing Member Heather Rooks has used social media to call LGBTQ+ people "groomers" and pedophiles.

Screenshot from X

district. What does that say to them when they don't get any kind of acknowledgement?" Chinnui asked, "I was just thinking to myself that teachers probably should just be aware of why a number of students are dressed like this."

In an email, Chinnui wrote to the school staff:

"Hello Fabulous Staff. I just wanted to let you know that you may see our students wearing more pink, teal, and white today. Today is a quickly growing annual event called 'International Transgender Day of Visibility.' Our President is expected to make some announcements today on new [legislation] to protect the rights of Trans students...many of our students have taken a keen interest in these legislative movements. How can you help? If you notice a student purposefully wearing the colors of the trans flag, a simple 'I see you' or 'I support you' can go a long way. Thank you fabulous staff!"

The email didn't seem ground-breaking. It was, by all accounts, an "FYI."

People often sent emails to the entire staff about upcoming fundraisers, personal life updates, and any news to share on or off campus, Chinnui said. This email, telling teachers about an honorary holiday, seemed equally on par.

But the email was leaked to far-right evangelical and conservative talking heads in addition to local elected officials going as high as the state Senate.

"No level of sexuality or lifestyle should be pushed onto little children. I don't care if they are pushing for heterosexuality. Leave our kids alone. Teach them math, reading, and science," said Warren Petersen, the leading Republican state senator who represents Gilbert. "These actions are completely inappropriate as someone who is in a position of trust with our children."

Facebook and Twitter posts attacked the teacher and the school district, calling Chinnui and the other teachers "groomers" and sexually exploiting kids.

But Chinnui, who had gone home sick with COVID a few hours after sending the email, had no clue that anything was wrong until days later: "I got a phone call several days later, because I was quarantining, from the principal saying, 'Hey just letting you know the news got ahold of your email.'"

The email circulated among far-right news

sites, such as *AZ Free News*, and was being parroted by people who normally espouse and legislate anti-trans policy, such as Peterson.



Before Peoria School Board Governing Member Heather Rooks was elected into her position, she often posted on her X, formerly known as Twitter, account anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, including the tweet above that tried to denounce River Chinnui's attempt at coming out as nonbinary.

Screenshot from X

Chinnui was confused. "I didn't really understand at all, because I felt my email wasn't negative in any way," they said. "I didn't feel it wasn't educational, and I felt it was necessary for our teachers to know why a small group of students was dressed that way."

By the end of the day, Chinnui was placed on administrative leave, pending an investigation.

"It was devastating," Chinnui said. "My identity is tied to being a teacher. Much of my friendships

are with my community of teachers. And when you're on paid leave, you're not allowed to talk to your co-workers. You're really taken away from your community."

TO THE END

Meanwhile, school board leaders such as Rooks and Hill began their campaign to remove Chinnui.

Rooks, who often re-tweets posts from the LGBTQ+ hate group Moms for Liberty, received a copy of Chinnui's original email sent out to staff about their transition and posted it on Twitter with Chinnui's full name.

Chinnui's deadname was exposed and said out loud during board meetings, and was posted online. Hate-filled emails, sent to both their personal email address and official school account,

appeared in their inbox.

An investigation sanctioned by the school district made Chinnui's life harder, they said, explaining that the process and the questions asked were "unfair" and "felt political."

The investigator asked questions about Chinnui's email: why they sent it, their curriculum, and what books were read.

"She kept asking, 'are you teaching pronouns,'" Chinnui remembered. "And I just kept saying no."

The investigator asked why Chinnui decided to read a book about boys wearing pink on a public reading day. Chinnui explained that the choice was made by their own child, and it was broadcast over the district's YouTube channel without repercussions. Through a records request to the school district, *LOOKOUT* attempted to get a copy of the investigation. The district denied our request.

By the next year, in an April public meeting for





the school district, Hill and Rooks both motioned to rehire a roster of teachers except for Chinnui and one other teacher.

During that board meeting, a rock went through the window of Chinnui's home, according to a Peoria Police Department's report.

"I didn't know how to compartmentalize it all. I was just prioritizing keeping my job," Chinnui said.

The stress of being called out publicly and having their reputation questioned took a toll on Chinnui's mental health. Soon after, Chinnui took a handful of pills and tried ending their life.

A speedy phone call to friends saved Chinnui, who stayed in an inpatient psychiatric care facility for a week.

The suicide attempt wasn't going to be a moment of failure for Chinnui. Instead, they used it as an opportunity to grow and advocate for themselves and other students. They decided to fight back and put an end to the abuse.

In July this year, Chinnui filed a civil complaint against Peoria Unified School District and board members Rooks and Hill.

The complaint asks for \$50,000 in damages and an additional \$1,000 from both Hill and Rooks.

Hill has since resigned from her position on the board.

A NEW SELF

On August 13, 2023, Chinnui stood in front of a large crowd for the second time. Rather than addressing the people who had driven them to the lowest point in their life, this crowd was there in support.

Flanked by cameras and photographers, they fumbled with a megaphone; speaking still wasn't a strongsuit, and they relied on reading from a phone.

But Chinnui had a lot to say, and a little bit of stage fright wasn't going to stand in the way.

The crowd—which had gathered to support Chinnui's battle against the Peoria Unified School District—cheered and waved signs, calling for an end to queer-based hatred.

It was a moment Chinnui had been yearning for—acceptance among a crowd of people that saw them for what they were, not just how they labeled themselves.

Standing outside Desert Harbor Elementary in Peoria, the school Chinnui worked so hard to be part of, their voice shook slightly when starting to speak. Their message was clear. They took a big breath in, and yelled: "My name is River Chinnui and my pronouns are they, them!" ▼

Phoenix's bars and the case of the "missing stairs"

Everyone seems to know that gay bars in the city openly discriminate. So why is no one fixing it?

STORY BY Shelby Rae Wills (they/she)



Art by: Joseph Darius Jaafari

For five years before moving to Phoenix, I lived in various small towns—populations of under 1,000 people. When I moved to Phoenix a year ago, I was ecstatic to be part of a vibrant queer scene—the 13th largest in the nation, in fact.

What I never expected was to find a “missing stair” in the city’s LGBTQ+ community.

The “missing stair” is a common metaphor for social situations where it’s widely known someone or something is problematic, but no one corrects the problem; Everyone just learns to step over the stair to avoid harm, and the stairs never get fixed.

Phoenix’s “missing stair” is a blatant misogyny problem within self-described queer spaces.

Anecdotally, I was told there is a misogyny and transphobia problem in Phoenix’s queer community. As a femme, or a person that is perceived to be feminine or female-presenting, I was discouraged from going to certain places.

But how could that be? Gay bars are hailed as inclusive. But after speaking to more than a dozen queer folks, I learned that people felt Phoenix’s gay bars are focused heavily on cisgender men’s experience.

Some say there is room for “men only” bars. But in a city that has so few spaces

for queer people across the gender spectrum, and in a state that has had an increase in aggressive legislation against trans and nonbinary people, should we really accept gay bars to act exclusionary?

While reporting for a story on security in Phoenix’s queer community, I visited all of the queer bars on Melrose, and many of the ones off Melrose. I, as a femme, was not well received across the board. The sexism was palpable at multiple places I walked into.

Reactions to me inside the bars ranged: from Stacy’s on Melrose being welcoming, warm, and willing to set up a time to speak, to Cruisin’ 7th, which gave me the up-down, hurriedly heard me out, then gave me a business card and rushed me out the door.

But it was Bar 1 that made me feel most uneasy. The bar, located on 16th Street just south of Indian

School Road, some say, is a neighborhood go-to. A bar-top game machine sits in the corner. Two pool tables fill the main space of the bar which are, I’m told, crowded out at nights by locals competing in games, and the patio is shaded by massive trees that house what feels like a full aviary of birds that chirp louder than the music at points.

In mid-March, I walked in around 6 p.m. while on assignment. My eyes took a moment to adjust from the bright setting sun outside. Before they could adjust, I heard the chatter among the bar quiet down. I eventually saw the bar was pretty full of masculine types. I quickly scanned the faces of everyone inside before heading to the bar. Some looked at me without a care (the preferred reaction). Others were obviously annoyed to see a feminine body in their space. One person looked outright disgusted.

I felt unwelcome. When the bartender eventually spoke to me, it was under the assumption I was there for business.

To be fair, I was. But I was also there to scope out places where I felt comfortable. It’s not like I dress as a reporter. I’m not dressed in a pant-suit. I don’t have a microphone on me. I don’t even have a media badge. So starting off, it was clear that

I was a person meant to be dealt with, rather than welcomed.

I smiled as I rattled out my spiel about reporting on safety and security in the LGBTQ+ community and requested to speak with the owner. He wasn’t in, but while the bartender fetched a business card for me, a couple next to me hushed their voices and looked down at each other. The bartender came back without a card, so I left a note. I later called the general number and left a voicemail. I still haven’t heard back.

To be clear, it’s not like there is a need for resounding applause whenever a feminine-looking person walks in the doors. In fact I went to Bartlett Bash, the bi-annual gay campout, with two femme friends recently and a few men commended us for our bravery for going. The comment was well-intentioned and supportive, but it pointed out that we

“...after speaking to more than a dozen queer folks, I learned that people felt Phoenix’s gay bars are focused heavily on cisgender men’s experience.”

- Shelby Rae Wills

were out of place even at a queer event.

This problem isn't new or specific to Phoenix.

In 2005, there was an academic dissertation on the misogyny at Saddlebags, a popular country gay bar in the South, even on the night of the week known for lesbians going there. After months of observation, the researcher found how territorial gay men were in defining their space, clinging to societal norms of pitting men against women, with men having more power.

Some have written the solution is to create female-centric spaces. But answering misogyny with misandry still leaves gender non-conforming folks in the lurch.

The recent Lesbian Bar Project docu-series demonstrates the value and need for explicitly lesbian spaces because they welcome demographics that are often left out of "inclusive" spaces such as gay bars.

An example of this is when earlier this year, Cruisin' 7th had a "ban list" with a disproportionate amount of trans women and drag queens of color. The people interviewed in that article explained how the bar's ban list destroyed the concept of the bar being a "safe space."

But Cruisin' 7th isn't the only missing stair in Phoenix, though.

"They don't want, really, any women going. Or anybody else, besides gay men." Martee Holmes said of Charlie's, a popular country-western gay bar in Melrose, after being charged a cover because she's a woman.

Holmes and her femme partner recently moved to Phoenix and took Holmes's male cousin and his girlfriend to Charlie's. Holmes was shocked when her partner, her cousin's girlfriend and herself were charged a cover charge. Her straight male cousin "just walked right on in, free and willy-nilly."

Holmes said she asked the security guard why only the femme-presenting people were being charged. She said the bouncer told her the policy is meant to create a safe space for gay men, who need

to be protected.

"If you're saying you're supposed to be a safe space, or being inclusive, just charge everyone," she said. "There shouldn't be someone at the door identifying people saying that you're a man or a woman."

I called Charlie's to ask about this policy and what they do about trans and non-binary folks, and they told me that bouncers determine a patrons gender by checking their ID card.

I also called Anvil, Phoenix's only leather bar, to inquire about their "Men's Only" nights. The bartender who answered said he didn't know about any men's only nights (even though its plainly stated on their website and social accounts). But, he told me, in general, "It's a men's bar, so I don't know what your purpose of coming in here would be other than

just to hang out with a bunch of gay men who would rather not have a woman in the bar."

He then seemed to deter me from going to Anvil: "Women are allowed in here. It's just that a lot of men leave the bar when a woman comes in."

When I asked about trans and non-binary people, he said, "Nobody's going to be treated like crap by the staff.

But customers... you can't

really do anything about that... I don't want you to come in and then feel like you were treated like shit by certain customers because they didn't understand."

He was warning me about yet another missing stair.

Trans people of any orientation, gender non-conforming folks, lesbians, bisexual, pansexual and asexual women are all part of the queer community and we deserve to belong in so-called inclusive spaces.

If you've faced gender discrimination in the queer community, I hope you feel seen and know that we don't need to quietly step over the missing stairs anymore. If you're a cisgender man reading this, I hope you see the stairs that are missing and help us fix them. Because there's a full staircase that needs repair, at this point. ▼

"Trans people of any orientation, gender non-conforming folks, lesbians, bisexual, pansexual and asexual women are all part of the queer community and we deserve to belong in so-called inclusive spaces."

- Shelby Rae Wills

Want to help unhoused people? Go back in the closet.

Phoenix Rescue Mission and similar charities require employees to sign an anti-LGBTQ+ statement of faith, creating ripple effects in care for queer people

STORY BY Juliette Rihl (she/her)

When a woman named M.B. applied as an intern at the Phoenix Rescue Mission in 2018, one of the state's largest religious organizations dedicated to fighting housing insecurity and substance use, she said she had high hopes.

As a social work graduate student at ASU, she thought working at the longstanding nonprofit would allow her to make a difference in people's lives. After interviewing at the mission's women's shelter, M.B. accepted a job and began filling out the required paperwork.

That's when a Phoenix Rescue Mission staff member handed her one last policy to sign: a religious agreement that mandated employees follow the organization's Christian values, including its disapproval of same-sex marriage.

"I stopped there and said, 'My beliefs don't align with this,'" said M.B., who asked *LOOKOUT* to use her initials instead of her full name out of fear of professional repercussions. *LOOKOUT* has verified M.B.'s story through emails and a copy of Phoenix Rescue Mission's religious agreement.

The agreement was non-negotiable, M.B. remembered a staff member telling her.

"It kind of dead-ended the conversation," M.B. said. "I said, 'I'm sorry, I'm not comfortable signing this.' And we were done."

Copies of emails M.B. supplied to *LOOKOUT*

confirmed M.B. declined a job at the organization because of its discriminatory policy.

LOOKOUT reached out to Phoenix Rescue Mission multiple times for a comment. The organization never responded back.

Some institutions have turned away interviewees who reveal they are LGBTQ+ or who don't agree with their stated values. Others have fired workers who violate the policies.

Faith-based institutions across the U.S., including schools, foster care organizations and substance use treatment centers, routinely ask prospective employees to sign similar religious agreements, known as morality clauses.

Some institutions have turned away interviewees who reveal they are LGBTQ+ or who don't agree with their stated values. Others have fired workers who violate the policies.

The legality of such practices is a gray area that

is actively being battled out at multiple levels of government, from city halls and state legislatures all the way up to the Supreme Court.

In Arizona, the Washington Elementary School District came under fire when they decided to not renew a contract with the faith-based Arizona Christian University, which also required students to sign a discriminatory religious agreement. The agreement, which is also in the student handbook, says that not abiding by one's gender assigned at birth is "offensive to God," and that same-sex marriage is immoral and aligned homosexuality with bestiality.

The school sued the district, which eventually renewed the contract.

But there's a rub in all of this: LGBTQ+ people are more likely to be impacted by housing insecurity, according to research from True Colors United, an advocacy group for unhoused LGBTQ+ youth. And some are now asking: If a powerhouse organization like Phoenix Rescue Mission can require employees to abide by discriminatory practices, how is it impacting people on the ground?

LEGAL DISCRIMINATION

Whether or not a person can lawfully be discriminated against based on their sexual orientation, gender identity or personal values can depend on a variety of factors, including the specific position they're being considered for, whether the employer receives government funding and more, legal experts said.

"There's layers of complications to this that policymakers really haven't done a good job of unwinding and really thinking through all the implications of," said Darrell Hill, policy director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Arizona, which advocates for greater LGBTQ+ protections in the state.

Arizona is one of 29 states that does not have a statewide law explicitly protecting LGBTQ+ people from discrimination, according to Human Rights Campaign, a national nonprofit that lobbies for LGBTQ+ rights.

"I think states and policymakers need to make clear, and we as a society need to make clear, our continuing support for and belief in nondiscrimination," Hill of the ACLU of Arizona said. "That people's characteristics—their race, their gender, their sex-

ual orientation, their gender identity—should not be the basis for whether or not they're employed or receive services."

But when is an employer allowed to discriminate based on sexual orientation or gender identity?

The short answer: It's complicated.

Several recent Supreme Court decisions and local actions have complicated how laws are enforced.

In 2012, the Supreme Court carved out a "ministerial exception" that gave religious organizations the freedom to make faith-based decisions when hiring ministers, but the decision did not give clear guidance on how to define a minister, and if that could be a rank-and-file employee or a leading religious practitioner.

In 2020, the court extended that exception and clarified the definition to include anyone whose work supports the organization's religious mission, such as teachers.

'A HUGE DISSERVICE'

Phoenix Rescue Mission makes no secret of its anti-LGBTQ+ views. A "Statement of Faith," which employees, volunteers, and board members are required to sign is posted on its website. It says:

- God "immutably creates each person as male or female";
- Marriage's sole meaning is "the uniting of one man and one woman"; and
- God "intends sexual intimacy to occur only between a man and a woman who are married."

Some other faith-based nonprofits in the Greater Phoenix area publicly maintain similar values, though it's not clear whether they require employees to comply with them. Church on the Street, which operates a sober living home and conducts outreach to people experiencing homelessness, states on its website that it believes "marriage is a union between one man and one woman permanently united spiritually, emotionally, and physically in a lifetime bond of loyal love."

LOOKOUT reached out to Church on the Street for comment, but did not get a response. Alternatively, there are other religious-based missions, in-

We believe in the Sanctity of Marriage:

The ministry of marriage is the divine institution of man and woman sharing a life together in holy matrimony. The beauty of marriage, in the uniting of two hearts, illustrates Christ's intentionality of being married to the church.

- We believe God wonderfully and immutably creates each person as male or female. These two distinct, complementary genders together reflect the image and nature of God. (Genesis 1:26-27)
- We believe the term "marriage" has only one meaning: the uniting of one man and one woman in a single, exclusive union, as delineated in Scripture. (Genesis 2:18-25)
- We believe God intends sexual intimacy to occur only between a man and a woman who are married to each other. (1 Corinthians 6:18; 7:2-5; Hebrews 13:4)

Excerpts of Phoenix Rescue Mission's Statement of Faith denouncing homosexuality and same-sex marriage.

Phoenix Rescue Mission website

Joining and maintaining service with the Phoenix Rescue Mission as an employee, High-Impact Volunteer, Board Member, or Board Ambassador is contingent upon continual subscription to the Statement of Faith.

cluding Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest and Phoenix Dream Center, whose websites state they accept employees and clients of all religions and backgrounds.

The client, who is bisexual, had to hide her sexuality and pretend to believe that homosexuality is a sin in order to get through the program.

Not only do such policies affect job seekers, they can also harm clients, M.B. said.

Several years after turning down the job at Phoenix Rescue Mission's women's shelter, M.B. was

working as a case manager at another local nonprofit when a judge mandated one of her clients to complete a program at the very same shelter.

The client, who is bisexual, had to hide her sexuality and pretend to believe that homosexuality is a sin in order to get through the program, M.B. said. If she didn't complete it, her children could have been taken from her.

"It was a huge disservice because she didn't make any therapeutic progress," M.B. said. "She just checked a box."

Multiple staff members of other local housing nonprofits told *LOOKOUT* the strict religious rules of Phoenix Rescue Mission and other faith-based nonprofits like it are well-known among the Valley's nonprofit sector.

"Everybody knows," M.B. said, adding that the practice is a way to manipulate people. "Everybody who works in that field for any significant amount of time knows the way that those agencies function." ▼

Who can we trust to save us?

LOOKOUT dives into why Arizona's gay bars aren't taking overdoses seriously, and who's doing something about it.

STORY BY Joseph Darius Jaafari (he/him)

PHOTOS BY Joseph Darius Jaafari & Moses Martínez

According to her family, Valerie Lucas had trouble dealing with high-stress situations.

Her mother, Heather Lucas, said her daughter was an extrovert by all definitions: She was the first to dance at a party; if there was a debate between going out with friends or staying in and watching a movie, the former was the correct choice.

"She was not a homebody whatsoever," Heather Lucas told me. "She was very, very smart. And I think that was part of the issue, was the emotional side. She just didn't know how to deal with everything."

It's a story many young women have faced. Logic was easy enough to work with. But emotions—those were more difficult to process. And just like other young people battling through tough times, it was easier to dive into binge drinking, which led to irresponsible drug use, which led to even worse decisions.

In Valerie Lucas's case, she was 13 when her father died, which is also when she began using heroin.

Like many mothers who tried to manage a teenager falling into serious drug use, Heather Lucas didn't know how to cope. But she knew what prison could do to her little girl, and she didn't want to risk reporting her to authorities.

At some point, though, drugs took over. A theft while Valerie Lucas was high led to a three-year stint inside Perryville Correctional facility, Arizona's all-woman prison.

While inside, Valerie Lucas started dating another prisoner. Both women were forced to work at Hickman's Egg Farm in Tonopah, Arizona during

their incarceration. After Valerie Lucas's release, she and her girlfriend continued working at Hickman's, and the two became inseparable, her mother said. In May 2021, Valerie's girlfriend died of an overdose, a mixture of fentanyl and alcohol at her apartment off-site from the farm, according to a Maricopa County Medical Examiner's report.

In 2022, more than 1,900 people died of overdoses in Maricopa County. Nearly half of those deaths happened in Phoenix.

Soon after that, her grandfather passed away—another emotional blow that Heather Lucas said her daughter took to heart. "I just think she didn't know how to handle it," she said. "The stress. It just — she just couldn't deal."

Probation notes for Valerie Lucas, gathered by LOOKOUT through a records request, mentioned a friend—whose name was redacted—dying of an overdose, and said that Valerie swore off drugs. "You just don't know what's in it," she told the probation officer, according to the report.

But just a few days later, the probation officer logged an additional note to Lucas's file. They needed a death certificate to close her case. Valerie Lucas had died of an overdose.



Photo by: Moses Martínez

I met Heather Lucas while working on a story about drug-related deaths of people who leave prison. As I spoke with her and others who knew Valerie Lucas, it made me wonder what could be done within the LGBTQ+ community when it comes to overdoses and drug usage.

In 2022, more than 1,900 people died of overdoses in Maricopa County. Nearly half of those deaths happened in Phoenix. Beyond geography, there is little data to account for overdoses within the LGBTQ+ community, both nationally or state-wide.

But public health researchers say they know it's there: The first hint of a national LGBTQ+ drug problem emerged in 2015. The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration did a health study that showed sexual minorities had abused opioids far more than their straight peers across multiple age groups. In 2019, six heads of research across Canada published a letter in the medical journal *The Lancet*, pleading with the U.S. and Canadian governments to start tracking and monitoring drug use and overdoses across both countries in regards to LGBTQ+ people. Since that plea, little has been done on a federal level.

That's not incredibly uncommon. Often, federal agencies don't have the best tools to get granular data, which leaves local governments to figure out who is being affected by specific public health crises.

The sense of urgency to address LGBTQ+ opioid abuse has not yet filtered down to Arizona. In 2018, the state did recognize it as a problem in a needs assessment report done by a third-party administrator. But on the state health department's website, as well as the Maricopa County Health Department's data portal, there is still no way to track how the overdose epidemic is affecting our community. As a result, it's unclear how bad our drug epidemic might be.

Arizona isn't alone in this dearth of local data. Many other cities with large queer populations—Seattle, Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco, to name a few—have turned to queer spaces, like gay bars, to carry Narcan. Also known by its generic name naloxone, Narcan is an overdose-reversing drug and has become a staple in first-aid kits. The nasal spray works within minutes and the intravenous needle has even better uptake in reversing an overdose.

I contacted 20 of Arizona's gay and lesbian bars and surveyed them on their use or knowledge of Narcan. Only 12 responded. Of those who did, most staff were unfamiliar with Narcan.

But in Arizona, many LGBTQ+ bars across the state (primarily in Phoenix and Tucson) have yet to even acknowledge a problem.

I contacted 20 of Arizona's gay and lesbian bars and surveyed them on their use or knowledge of Narcan. Only 12 responded. Of those who did, most staff were unfamiliar with Narcan. Others who were familiar with it dismissed the need for such a life-saving drug in their businesses, pushing back saying their establishments were "drug free," or that they didn't want to "face liability" for having the drug on hand. Only a few said they had trained their staff on how to use Narcan and it was something they had on hand.

While many queer spaces are failing to help keep their community safe, there is a small group of people across various organizations in Arizona working to change the way people view drug use and to see that the owners of queer spaces start doing their own part.

A SOLUTION WITH A STRUGGLE

For those who only deign to visit Phoenix's populous corridor in midtown, the area surrounding Steele Park and over to the Veteran Administration Hospital, is often referred to as a dump or a "ghetto."

It's true to a mild degree; the area has its stragglers. But it's an important location for queer history in Phoenix, if only because it's where the yearly Pride festival is held.

There's another gem around the area, blocked behind brown-tinged gates and brick walls, working to help fight the opioid crisis within queer spaces—and he's just under 6-feet tall.

When I first walked into the medical center where Al Chapoy worked as a social worker, I was taken aback. I have spent many hours, both in my personal and professional life, inside medical centers. For the most part, they all have the same feeling: clean, cold, and sterile.

Chapoy's office, though, had a bit more whimsy than I was used to. And it all made sense when I sat down at his desk.

It was a mess, cluttered with pamphlets and worksheets. A gallon-sized Ziploc bag overflowed with drug test strips and empty nasal spray bottles which he said he uses to demonstrate how to save a life using Narcan or test drugs for fentanyl.

Chapoy reached into the Ziploc bag and pulled out a small white nasal spray. It was Narcan. The device, itself, looks a bit like a toy rocket, the kind you'd win in an arcade machine. The drug inside, naloxone, acts as an inhibitor for opioids.

The drug was introduced in the 1970s and given to paramedics to reverse overdoses. For a while, you'd only see Narcan inside ambulances. But that changed when the opioid epidemic made its way into the white-rural enclaves of Appalachia.

As a result, more first responders began carrying the drug. It wasn't just paramedics. Firefighters and cops were carrying it, too.

The spread of fentanyl in recreational drugs over the past five years has meant that overdoses can literally happen anywhere, at any time, and with any amount of drug.

For example, Chapoy explained, a bag of cocaine often has what he calls a "chocolate chip effect," which means that a bit of fentanyl can live in one part of the bag, and not infect the rest of it.

When you take any kind of opioid—from a painkiller prescribed by your doctor to that tiny bit of fentanyl that has become more likely to turn up in bags of your favorite party drug—the opioid latches onto receptors in your brain that slow your breathing and moderate pain. Take too much, and the receptors stay stuck, then you stop breathing. Once introduced into the body, naloxone immediately takes the opioids off the receptors within moments.

The easiest way to get the drug into someone is through the nasal spray, which is what Chapoy held in his hand. Once you put the shaft of the rocket inside the nose, you press the middle plunger and the drug is inhaled, even if the person overdosing

doesn't seem to be breathing.

When Chapoy got his job, he went out on a limb and took a box of Narcan to gay bars, places like Stacy's at Melrose, Pat O's Bunkhouse, or Kobalt, where he knew it would be welcomed. He wasn't supposed to do it, technically. But, he said, there was a hidden need within queer spaces and groups.

At one point, there was an entire roster of spaces that wanted to get trained in Narcan usage, which included how to use the nasal spray, along with the injectable form that goes into someone's leg. Chapoy also trained staff at these spaces on how to spot an overdose: pale skin, sweaty, short of breath, wide pupils.

"Whenever we start to have the conversations where they actually allow us to go ahead, they're receptive to the idea of having these trainings in their businesses, they actually get pretty excited," Chapoy said.

But with the COVID-19 pandemic, funding disappeared and overdoses became more prevalent, and at the same time, many queer spaces pulled back on carrying Narcan.

He pointed to the calendar behind him: "Before COVID, this whole thing was filled," he said, mentioning that he had talks with people at many different queer spaces (he calls them Rainbow places).



A collection of all the different kinds of harm reduction offered, from Narcan nasal spray to fentanyl drug testing strips. This month, Narcan has been made available over the counter at any drug store without a prescription. Photo by: Joseph Darius Jaafari





Naloxone comes in a nasal spray, and also an injectable with a vial of the drug. Though the nasal spray is easier to use, the vial of naloxone is more available, according to care navigators.

Photos by: Moses Martínez

Now, there are only a few dates filled out for the whole month of August.

For months, Chapoy has tried to go back into gay bars and make a point that they need to have Narcan available. But he's received nothing but pushback from owners and managers who falsely claim they would be held liable if anything went wrong with administering the drug. Other spaces are claiming that they are "drug-free" and don't want to condone illicit drug usage in their space.

"The reality is that there are people doing drugs in these spaces," he said. "Whether you say you don't want it to happen, or not."

"We Don't Have Drugs"

The Anvil bar on Thomas Road and 24th Street is as close to a classic leather bar that Phoenix has.

I've been to The Anvil many times. I danced there every now and then, sat on the back bench of the patio corner a handful of times more, and I've seen dozens of people do bumps of cocaine in multiple corners. In broad daylight, I was once asked if I was selling drugs.

But when I called The Anvil to ask if they had Narcan, the response I got shocked me.

"What? Do we have what?" the employee asked.

"Do you have naloxone, or you might know it as Narcan? It helps reverse overdoses in the event there's one on your property," I responded.

The bartender on the phone was miffed in my questioning. "This is a bar," he said. "We don't have drugs."

I then asked if they'd be open to anyone coming in and talking to them about having Narcan on site, and I was politely told no.

But it wasn't just The Anvil's response that made my head go sideways. BS West, the only gay bar in Scottsdale, doesn't have Narcan and the staff has never done training. Oz Bar, The Rock, and Bar1 also are Narcan-free zones.

When I called IBT's in Tucson, the bar manager who answered the phone explained they didn't have Narcan because, "We are a successful bar and we don't want to be associated with that."

Of the businesses I called, only four—Stacy's at Melrose, Charlie's, Kobalt, and Flex Spas—have naloxone available.

WHO TO TRUST

The westside of Phoenix, for those who have never been, looks vastly different from the East.

There's more congestion and greenery as you head East, closer to downtown and beyond there into the East Valley. But on the westside around 27th Avenue and Indian School, it's more industrial, with miles of single-family ranch homes and strip malls. It's more suburban, and it's where the best tacos usually exist.

It's also where Beth Joly works.

Joly and I first meet in the waiting room of her office at Terros Health. From the entrance to the back wall, there are signs promoting Narcan, and how to properly clock the signs of an overdose. On the back glass divider, which separated the waiting room from the offices, hangs a picture mural of everyone who has died of an overdose across multiple states.

Joly walks out in an oversized black tee shirt, a giant black metal chain hung across her neck, a tight mullet sprouted from her head, and she has a labret piercing; All tinged with the smell of cigarette smoke. Her voice is powerful, but incredibly friendly.

I had heard of Joly through the grapevine multiple times, and that she was doing impactful work in creating access to Narcan and getting people into recovery. She was a one-woman advocacy group, making a difference in people's lives and showing up for legislative testimonials.



Beth Joly, a care navigator at Terros Health in west Phoenix, holds up a picture of her sister who died of a fentanyl drug overdose. Photo by: Joseph Darius Jaafari



An example of how Narcan is placed inside someone's nose. People administering the drug should wait at least two minutes to see if the drug worked before giving another spray into the nose.

Photo by: Moses Martínez

Joly starts off by telling me that she's been in recovery for almost a decade. She did time in Perryville prison, and a few years ago got her wife into recovery. Her sister, who died of an overdose from fentanyl exposure, is why she got into harm reduction.

Her office is exceptionally clean yet littered with pictures of people who have died and molded her worldview of how serious the fentanyl problem has gotten: "The reality is that this shit is everywhere," she said. "And if you don't think it'll ever happen to you, you're wrong."

When I told Joly about what we found in our reporting about gay bars in Arizona not providing Narcan training to their staff, or the claim that owners would be held liable, she guffawed.

"Why don't you just take a look at the Good Samaritan Law," she said. She's referring to the law passed last year that allows all private citizens, including business owners, to step in and help someone in the case of an overdose without legal repercussions if the situation turns fatal. "So why not protect yourself with something that could save a life? Would you rather have someone dead in your bar? That seems like more of a liability."

It's a common problem, said Alexis Moran, a care navigator at Shot in the Dark, which is a rag-tag group of care-providers who go into parking lots at night and hand out harm reduction supplies, such as naloxone, clean syringes, and other products.

Moran, who uses they and them pronouns, said there is a lot of misinformation around the use of Narcan, but more often it's a problem of empathy. They explained how only a few weeks before we

spoke, someone overdosed in a Safeway parking lot in Scottsdale.

"I went to grab my Narcan out of the car, and the people, you know, surrounding me just, you know, were shouting their comments like, 'What if he's allergic,' 'Why do you have that?'," they said, adding that they eventually brought him back from the overdose.

And out of that entire experience, Moran said they left livid with the other people who stood by.

"I was angry at the questions, or people telling me that I'm an angel, and saying that I saved my spot in heaven. That kind of made me mad," they said. "So it wasn't so much about like, yeah, I saved this man's life. It was, 'Why the fuck couldn't you guys have?'"

When I told Moran about the response of the employees and managers at the gay bars I spoke with, they sighed heavily: "People want to complain about how many people are using drugs, but just turn a blind eye to it and not be part of the solution," Moran said. "You could literally have someone dying in front of you and the ability to save them, and they still say no."

Moran's comment rang through me, and left me with a sense of hopelessness. Who can we trust, if not the people with power in our community? Do the people who own and manage our dedicated safe spaces care if we live or die?

But it also left me with a bit of hope, that maybe they'll get to see the power of someone being revived back to life in front of them, and possibly asking themselves the question Moran asked of others: "Why aren't I doing this?" ▼

LOOKOUT

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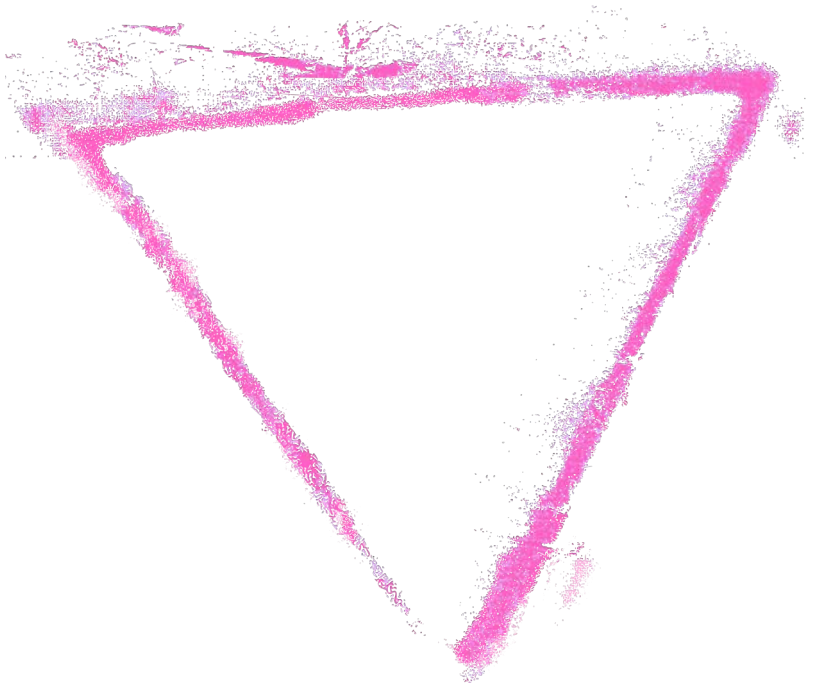




Photo by: Joseph Darius Jaafari