Philly, nation respond to Orlando massacre

By Jen Colletta
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The nation’s deadliest mass shooting, and the worst terrorist attack on American soil since 9/11, rocked the LGBT community this past week.

Early Sunday morning, more than 100 people were gunned down at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Fla., in a targeted act of terror. Forty-nine people died from their wounds: a Philadelphia teen who graduated high school last week, a couple who just bought a home, a Disney World performer, a cancer survivor, a teacher, an accountant.

From calls for gun reform to organized actions to promote LGBT visibility, the tragedy continues to permeate both the community and country.

Community comes together

It was a heart-wrenching scene Monday night at Philadelphia City Hall, as local LGBT choruses led more than 2,000 in “True Colors,” “We Shall Overcome” and “Singing For Our Lives” — music that was punctuated by the sobs of family and friends of 18-year-old Akyra Murray.

Murray’s loved ones and classmates from West Catholic Preparatory High School, from which she graduated last week, huddled on the steps of City Hall, beneath the American and rainbow flags, both flying at half-staff.

Murray, 18, was the youngest victim of the mass shooting at Pulse. Murray had been on vacation with her family; her mother, who is still in Orlando, listened on a cell phone to the speeches at City Hall from city and LGBT community leaders.

Mayor Jim Kenney choked up while talking about Murray, a standout basketball star at West Catholic whom he said he’d seen play.

“I can’t tell you how devastating it is that she was in that club,” the mayor said through tears.

Kenney repeatedly reaffirmed the city’s support for the LGBT community.

“This vigil is a way to remember, to mourn and to stay united,” he said.

Unity was a theme throughout the candlelit vigil. "This is a safe space," Nellie Fitzpatrick, director of the Office of LGBT Affairs, told the crowd about the vigil.

AN ESTIMATED 2,000 PEOPLE ATTENDED A VIGIL MONDAY NIGHT AT PHILADELPHIA CITY HALL IN MEMORY OF THE VICTIMS OF THE ORLANDO MASSACRE

Movement ramps up on PA antibias bills

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A vote could come next week that could enable the long-stalled LGBT antibias bill to move to the state House floor.

State Rep. Dan Frankel (D-23rd Dist.) on Wednesday gave notice to the House that he intends to call for a vote on his discharge resolution that he submitted last week. A discharge resolution allows for legislation to bypass a committee vote and head straight to the House floor for consideration.

Procedural rules require two legislative days’ notice before a vote can be taken on a discharge resolution, meaning the discharge vote could happen June 21 or after.

Frankel introduced the Pennsylvania Fairness Act in September, and it was sent to the State Government Committee, where the legislation has languished for several sessions. The bill would add sexual orientation and gender identity to the classes protected from discrimination in housing, employment and public accommodations.

Frankel noted that the measure has wide legislative support — including 82 cosponsors — and a vast majority of Pennsylvanians, about 72 percent, support LGBT nondiscrimination legislation. However, the State Government Committee is chaired by virulently antigay Rep. Daryl Metcalfe (R), who has pledged to kill the legislation.

“We’ve gotten tired of the fact that a piece of legislation that has brought the cosponsorship it has in the House isn’t even getting a hearing or a vote,” Frankel said about the discharge approach.

Nondiscrimination efforts also recently ramped up in the Pennsylvania Senate. State Sen. Patrick

Extra security noticeable at Pride

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Philadelphia Pride went off without any major hitches, said Philly Pride Presents executive director Franny Price.

Held just hours after the worst mass shooting in U.S. history, at a gay club in Florida, police presence was significantly ramped up, Price said.

“There was every branch of law enforcement there,” Price said, noting there were uniformed and plainclothes Philadelphia police, along with Homeland Security and SWAT Team members. “I can’t thank law enforcement enough for keeping us safe.”

Though there were references to the Orlando events throughout Pride — including a moment of silence at the start of the parade, at the judges’ reviewing stand and on stage at Penn’s Landing — the incident did not dampen the spirit.
You are not alone, not a single one of us. No matter how you walk through life — how you pray or worship, your socioeconomic status, ability, disability — you are not alone.

“Let us hold each other a bit tighter, be a bit kinder, gentler and more forgiving with one another,” added speaker David Acosta. “Never be afraid to say, ‘I love you’ and to mean it. Life is a precious gift and moments are too brief.”

A number of speakers referenced how closely the Orlando tragedy hit for the local LGBT community.

“This happened at Pulse, but this could have been at any of our local LGBT clubs or social gatherings,” said the Rev. Jeff Jordan, who led the crowd in an interfaith prayer.

Nikki Lopez, a native of Daytona Beach, Fla., said she frequented Pulse when coming out, saying it was one of the few “places of solace” for young LGBT people in the area.

Lopez said her mother called her Sunday crying, after she heard about the shooting.

“She said, ‘Nicole, this could have been you,’” Lopez said. “My mother would often wait up until I got home from Pulse, sometimes 3 in the morning, 4 in the morning, even 5 in the morning. That dance floor was my space of transcendence, liberation. Let the dance floor be your authentic place of liberation; don’t let fear strip that power away from you.”

Lopez noted the incident has particularly impacted the queer Latinx community, saying the killer sought to “erase us, make our love unworthy, make it so that we didn’t exist.”

“I look around you,” she told the crowd. “We exist. We exist in power.”

The crowds swelled so large that streets around City Hall had to be shut down to vehicular traffic.

Once the formal speeches ended, many assembled marched around City Hall, holding signs and waving rainbow flags.

Many held signs calling for tighter gun laws.

“We have to not only fight for our rights but also fight for gun control to make sure this doesn’t happen again anywhere in the world,” said Joe Croft, of Philadelphia.

“I think it’s really important that we all need to come together right now,” added Croft, who held a poster that read “Love Must Always Win.” “We’ve gone so far with government reforms and getting the rights we’ve been fighting for so long, so for something like this to happen, it’s really scary.”

India H., of Schwenksville, said the vigil enabled the community to confront that fear.

“I felt like I had to do something and I didn’t know what. I felt like the least I could do was make sure we got as many victims’ names accounted for as possible,” she said about a handmade display of the victims’ names and ages she was carrying.

She described the incident, which came at the height of the LGBT Pride season, as “mood whiplash.”

“When Pride season rolls around, it’s hard not to get giddy because you finally have permission — though not that you need it — to be who you are,” she said. “But then something this horrible and this violence just makes you realize we have so much father to go. Marriage equality is not even a drop in the bucket.”

The youngest victim

A quiet force.

That’s how Akyra Murray was described by West Catholic Preparatory High School board of governors member Aaron Spence.

Murray, 18, was on vacation in Orlando, celebrating her high-school graduation. At 11 p.m. Saturday, she posted a photo on Twitter of the outfit she planned to wear to the club that night. Murray’s parents dropped off her, her cousin Tiara Parker and their friend, Patience Carter, at the club around 11:30 p.m.; the trio had googled for the best dance clubs in the area.

After several hours of dancing, the three were preparing to leave the club when gunfire started. Murray and Carter got out but came back to look for Parker. They ended up hiding in a bathroom stall with 15 other people;

Murray, Parker and another man tried to push the stall door closed as the gunman fired repeatedly, hitting all three women — Murray in the arm, Parker in the side and Carter in each leg.

Murray was able to text and call her mother; her parents rushed to the scene but were kept away by police.

Parker said she and Murray tapped each other to try to keep each other in consciousness as they were held hostage in the bathroom; Parker said she eventually felt Murray’s weight grow heavier on her before SWAT teams burst through the bathroom wall.

Murray was the youngest of the Pulse victims.

The basketball standout was set to start school in the fall at Mercyhurst University. She would have been on a full athletic scholarship.

“She always had this kind of quiet confidence about her,” Spence said. “She didn’t have to throw her stats up to let you know she was an amazing athlete. She just worked very hard and you saw the fruits of her labor.”

She was honored this year for scoring 1,000 points for West Catholic’s Lady Burrs team.

Murray was an honors student who graduated third in her senior class.

Beulah Osueke, head coach of West Catholic’s girls basketball team, praised Murray’s leadership skills.

“Akyra was a respectful and self-determined young woman who served as a natural leader to her teammates and [whose who] observed her from afar,” Osueke said in a statement.

Spence echoed those sentiments, noting Murray got along well with everyone in the West Catholic community.

“She loved her friends intensely. She was really kind to anybody,” he said. “Her name was never associated with any kind of drama. She was just a really good kid who was trying to work really hard to get where she wanted to go.”

Spence said Murray’s killing has hit the tight-knit West Catholic community hard.

A number of West Catholic basketball players and students attended the vigil Monday night at City Hall. The school held a private vigil Wednesday evening.

“From the time you come in to West Catholic to the time you leave, you’re told you’re part of a family, and it is true,” Spence said.

“Everyone is gutted by this news. This young woman in her prime was torn down. Even though she just graduated, Akyra is part of the alumni community, and we’ll do whatever it takes to make sure her family is taken care of.”

Carter, 20, was treated for her injuries and released from the hospital.

Parker, 20, a New York University student and Foxx9 intern, remained in the hospital as of press time. In an interview with reporters from the hospital, Carter said she was grappling with guilt that she survived while so many did not.

Local bars, clubs re-evaluate security

LGBT hotspots in Philadelphia have increased security in the wake of the Orlando attack.

“We have to give kudos to the Philadelphia Police Department,” Michael Weiss, owner of Woody’s, told PGN June 13, the day after Philadelphia Pride and the shooting in Orlando. “They were the ones who came forward and said they’d have a detail outside Woody’s.”

During Philadelphia Pride, there were four officers stationed outside the bar.
They served on their day off, Weiss said, noting many of the city’s on-duty officers were already assigned to monitor the parade route.

Woody’s also instituted a bag check and is looking into metal-detector wands to avoid police pat-downs. Weiss said bag-checks are already in place at Voyeur, another bar he owns with his brother, Billy, because it’s open later and has dealt with issues in the past.

“It can get a little intrusive,” Weiss said of the increased security, “but at this point, it’s for the good of the many.”

Tabu co-owner Jeffrey Sotland said the bar tripled security during Pride and stopped people with guns or knives from entering. Three guns and two knives were discovered during bag-checks, he said.

“Everyone who had their bags checked and were delayed in getting in were quite understanding,” Sotland wrote in an email to PGN.

Darryl Depiano, owner of I Candy, said bag checks were added as a permanent policy change. No dangerous items were found during Pride.

“We’re definitely on heightened alert,” Depiano said.

At Stir, the owners are meeting to discuss adding emergency trainings for staff that include active shooter simulations. Co-owner Stacey Vey said the bar already has training for less severe emergencies.

Vey said Stir would not seek increased police presence. Officers regularly patrol Rittenhouse Square, where the bar is located, and employees have not had trouble getting a quick response from authorities when needed.

“We don’t want to live in total fear,” Vey said. “But we do want to be more proactive.”

Stir does employ a doorman. There are three emergency exits: two in the back and one in the front.

“We’re so small, we can see everyone come in the door,” Vey added. “We have a steady following of the same people. If anybody looks out of place, we keep an eye on them.”

She said Stir uses a security camera system that she can check from her smartphone.

Several bars said they’d seen an increase in patronage since the shooting; many people told the owners that they wanted to come to show they weren’t afraid to be out and proud.

“People want to digest and talk about it and unite,” Vey said.

Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney stopped by Woody’s during Pride last weekend. Weiss said Kenney spent a long time talking with customers, shaking hands and hugging people.

“It’s one thing to go to Penn’s Landing for the Pride festival,” Weiss said. “But it’s quite another for the mayor to come to the center of the Gayborhood to the city’s largest gay bar and sit and show support with our community.”

Depiano said I Candy is usually less crowded the Monday after Pride because people have already spent their money and partied.

“This year, Monday was a really big night for people to come out,” he said. “It definitely changed the atmosphere.”

Elected officials respond

Lt. Gov. Mike Stack ordered rainbow colors to light the Capitol Building in Harrisburg, as flags flew at half-staff to honor the shooting victims.

“We must send a message in whatever way we can that hatred and violence toward any people based on their group identity is morally wrong,” Stack said. “We stand now with the LGBT community in expressing both outrage and deep sorrow over the attack in Orlando.”

Stack was one of many elected officials around the country who responded quickly to the events in Orlando.

On Monday morning, U.S. Sen. Bob Casey (D) held a press conference in Pittsburgh to unveil a new measure that would prohibit people convicted of misdemeanor hate-crime charges from purchasing firearms.

“If you have proven you will commit criminal acts based on hate, you absolutely should not have access to a gun. It’s common sense,” Casey said in a statement about the Hate Crimes Prevention Act. “It is time we as members of Congress do something.”

The bill would define “misdemeanor hate crime” as any federal or state misdemeanor that is motivated in part by hate or bias related to race, color, religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability.

Pennsylvania’s hate-crime law does not include protections based on the sexual orientation or gender identity of the victim,

According to Casey’s office, more than 43,000 hate crimes between 2010-14 included the use of a gun.

Casey met with LGBT leaders in Pittsburgh Monday before announcing the bill. He also called for other gun-control measures, such as universal background checks, a ban on military-style weapons, limits on clips and magazine sizes and the rejection of those on the terrorist watchlist from purchasing firearms.

Also Monday, openly gay Pennsylvania State Rep. Brian Sims (D) read the names of the Orlando victims from the House floor.

“I read their names both in tribute to their memory, and also to serve as a reminder that the actions of our government have consequences,” Sims said in a statement. “I did so to remind them that once hate is given status in our system, it spills into tragedy and bloodshed.”

The investigation continues

The FBI Sunday identified 29-year-old Omar Mateen as the shooter, an American born to Afghanistani parents. He lived about two hours north of Orlando in Port St. Lucie.

Investigators say Mateen visited Pulse a number of times earlier this month and also visited Disney World during its annual Gay Days festival, raising the possibility he was casing the park as a possible target.

Pulse staff and patrons have reported that Mateen was a familiar face at the club, with one employee estimating he visited twice a month for the past three years. Mateen also reportedly used gay-dating apps Grindr and Jack’d.

During the attack, Mateen called law enforcement to pledge loyalty to ISIS.

Mateen’s father reportedly told investigators he was offended by a gay couple kissing, investigators said.

Mateen was married and had one child. An ex-wife told investigators he was physically abusive.