

stepping stone

For 50 years, Stepping Stone has been saving LGBTQ+ lives through community-centered recovery - as one of the nation's only addiction treatment nonprofits built by and for our community.

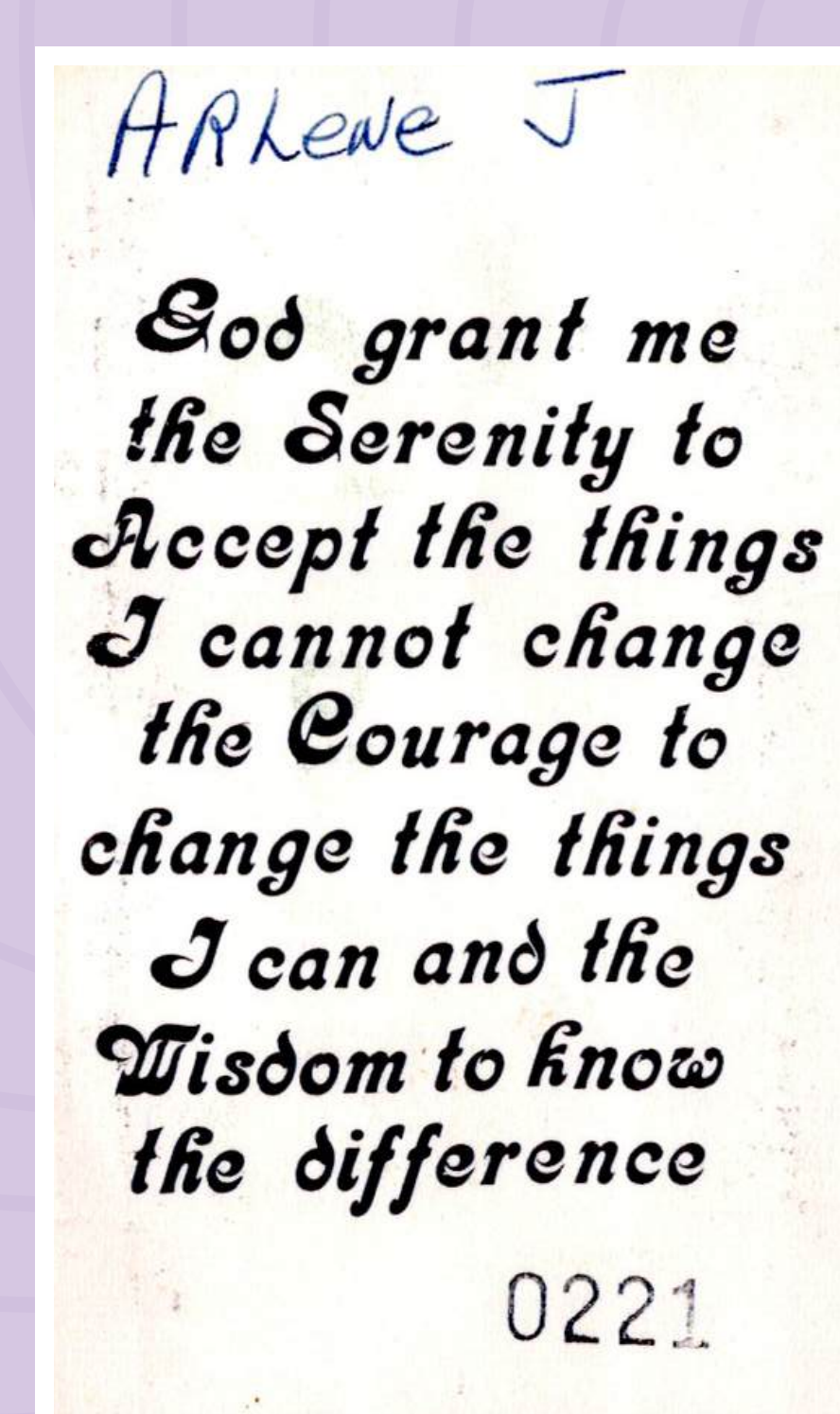
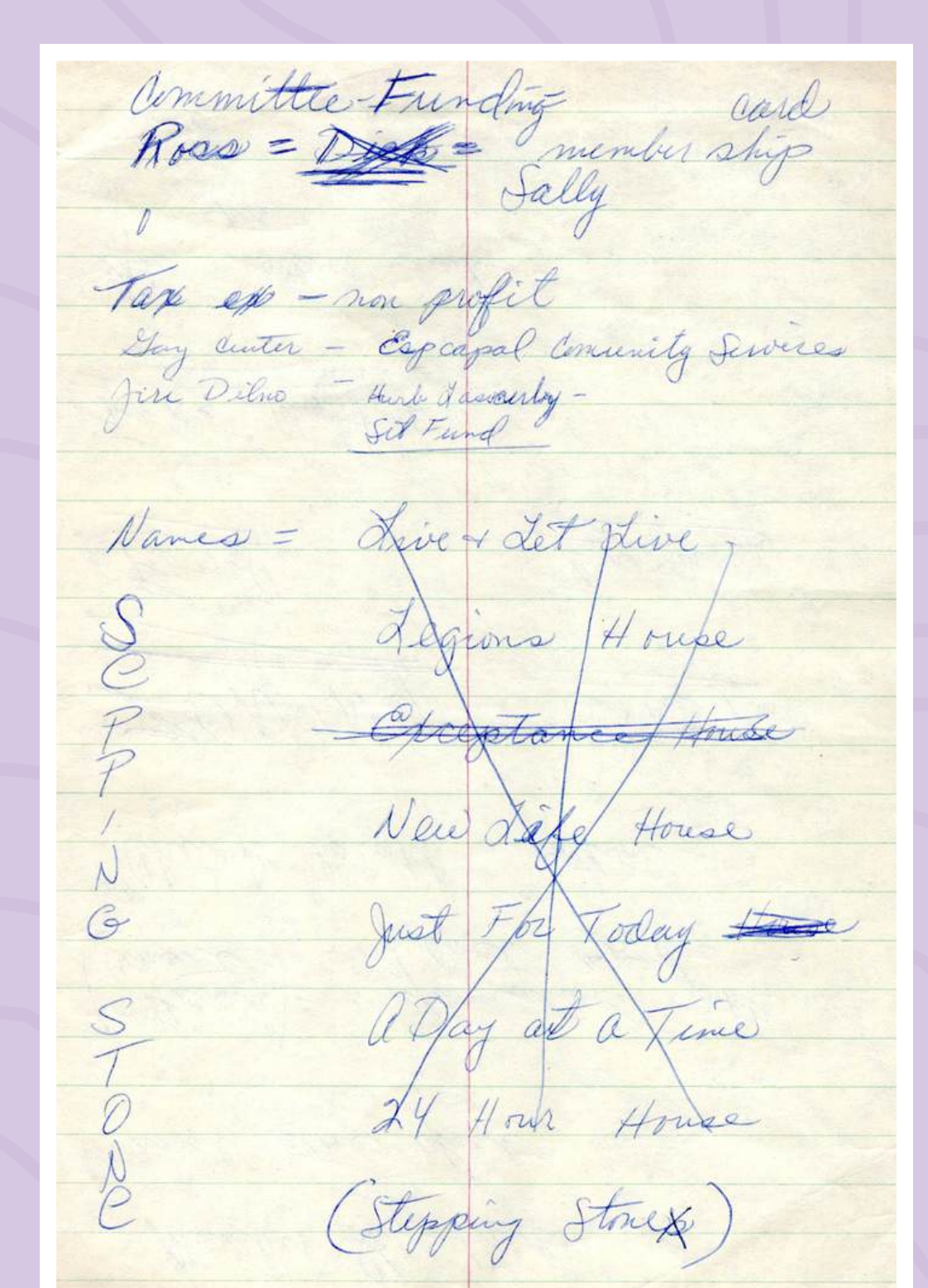
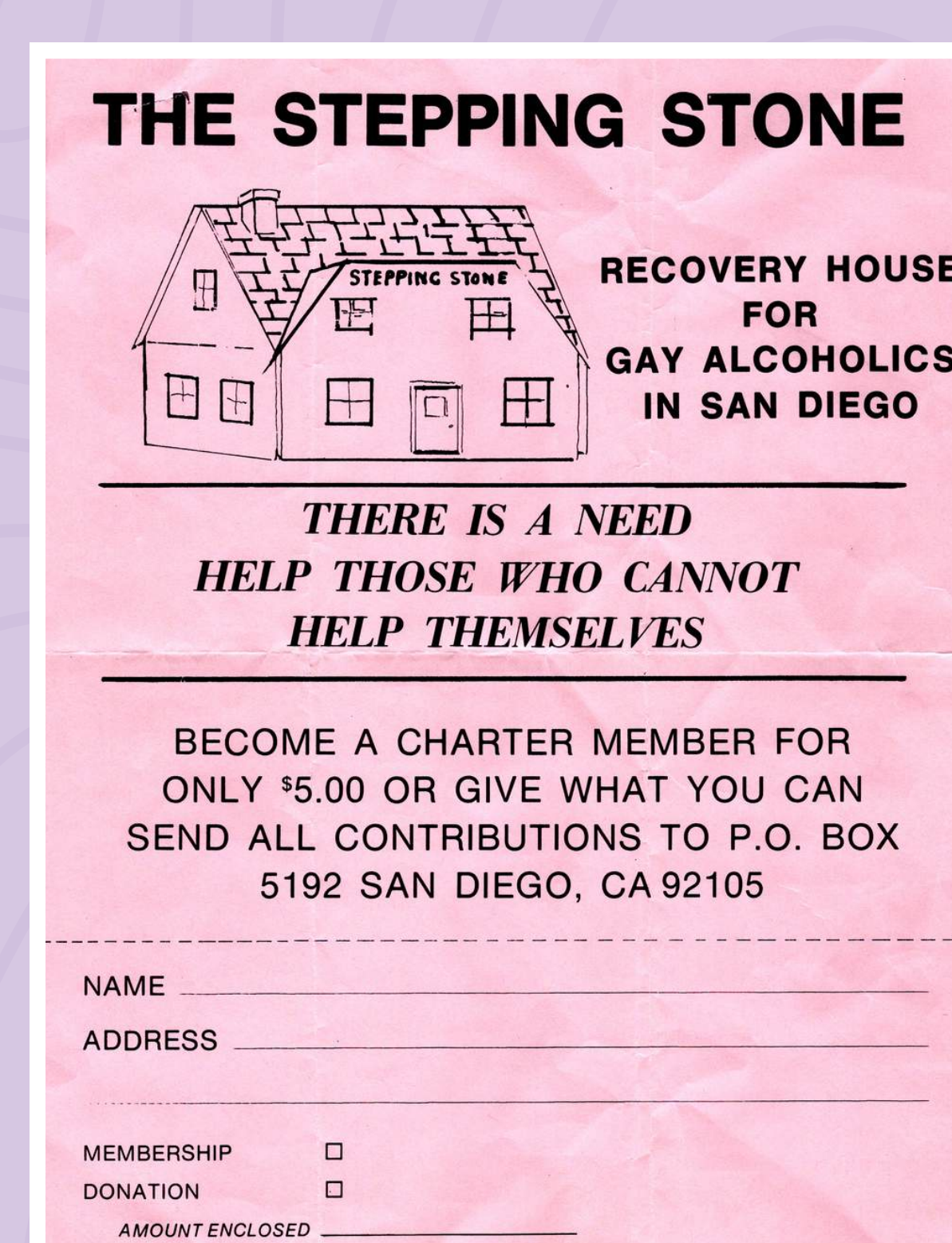
1971-1979

Founding a Safe Place to Tell the Truth.

Larger Context: LGBTQ+ visibility grows after Stonewall, but safety remains fragile and uneven. Medical and social stigma remain intense even as formal classifications begin to shift. By citing homosexuality as a mental illness, the American Psychiatric Association stigmatized LGBTQ+ people. Declassification culminated in 1973, when LGBTQ+ voices were heard at the annual APA Conference, and the APA Board of Trustees voted to remove homosexuality from the DSM.

Catalyst: Volunteer work at the National Council on Alcoholism reveals a steady stream of calls from gay alcoholics seeking help (12–14 calls a day).

February 17, 1976: The first organizing meeting at Metropolitan Community Church (Fern Street, Golden Hills) to start a recovery home for gays and lesbians; charter members convene.



Founding archival documents, including a flyer, charter member card, and a meeting note deciding on the name, Stepping Stone.



Stepping Stone's first residence located in Golden Hill.
(P085.021, courtesy of Lambda Archives of San Diego)



May 1976: Stepping Stone incorporates and begins the process to secure 501(c)(3) status.

July 1976: San Diego County Alcohol and Drug Services funds the residential program.

First Residence: The first Stepping Stone property was located across the street from the Gay and Lesbian Center (now the San Diego LGBT Community Center, then located at 2250 B Street, Golden Hill). The house closes after about one year.

June 1979: The Central Avenue property is rented and Stepping Stone Central opens. The five small houses are named and organized by function and resident community.

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1980–1989

Surviving Loss, Holding Community.



March on Sacramento pre-march gathering in front of Lambda Community Center, 1988 (P019.179, courtesy of Lambda Archives of San Diego)

The origins of harm reduction — practical strategies aimed at reducing negative health consequences — can be traced back to the courageous LGBTQ+ advocates who responded to the AIDS crisis. Their activism not only brought harm reduction into public discourse but also laid the groundwork for peer-to-peer support systems.

Organizations offering affirming, community-grounded recovery support during the AIDS era weren't simply treating addiction — they were holding people through catastrophic, compounding loss, at a moment when the wider culture either looked away or assigned blame.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic reshapes LGBTQ+ life and makes specialized, affirming care even more essential. Stepping Stone's work in this decade should be framed through presence, dignity, and community resilience — including the truth that many were determined to die sober.

The desire to be sober, to be present and clear-eyed through grief, to die with dignity rather than numbed — these were acts of profound self-determination in one of the most hostile environments the LGBTQ+ community has ever faced.

HIV/AIDS emerges and devastates LGBTQ+ communities; fear, stigma, and institutional neglect are widespread. Care networks form through mutual aid, chosen family, and community-based organizations.



Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt at San Diego Golden Hall, 1988 (P019.185, courtesy of Lambda Archives of San Diego)

San Diego Pride Festival, late 1980s/early 1990s (P104.144, courtesy of Lambda Archives of San Diego)



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1990-1999

A Building That Said: You Matter.



Larger Context: Expanding funding and the introduction of HIV care infrastructure reshape the landscape nationally and locally. Community-based organizations increasingly become formal providers. The defining legislative moment of this decade comes on August 18, 1990, when the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency (CARE) Act creates the largest federal program focused exclusively on providing care and treatment to people living with HIV.

With a vision to transform the environment where the LGBTQ+ community receives treatment, Cheryl Houk leads the effort to secure a new facility for Stepping Stone.

After a citywide search for a new location, the best option turns out to be the boldest one: completely rebuild the current Central Avenue site. A facility designed from the ground up to support a community model of treatment.



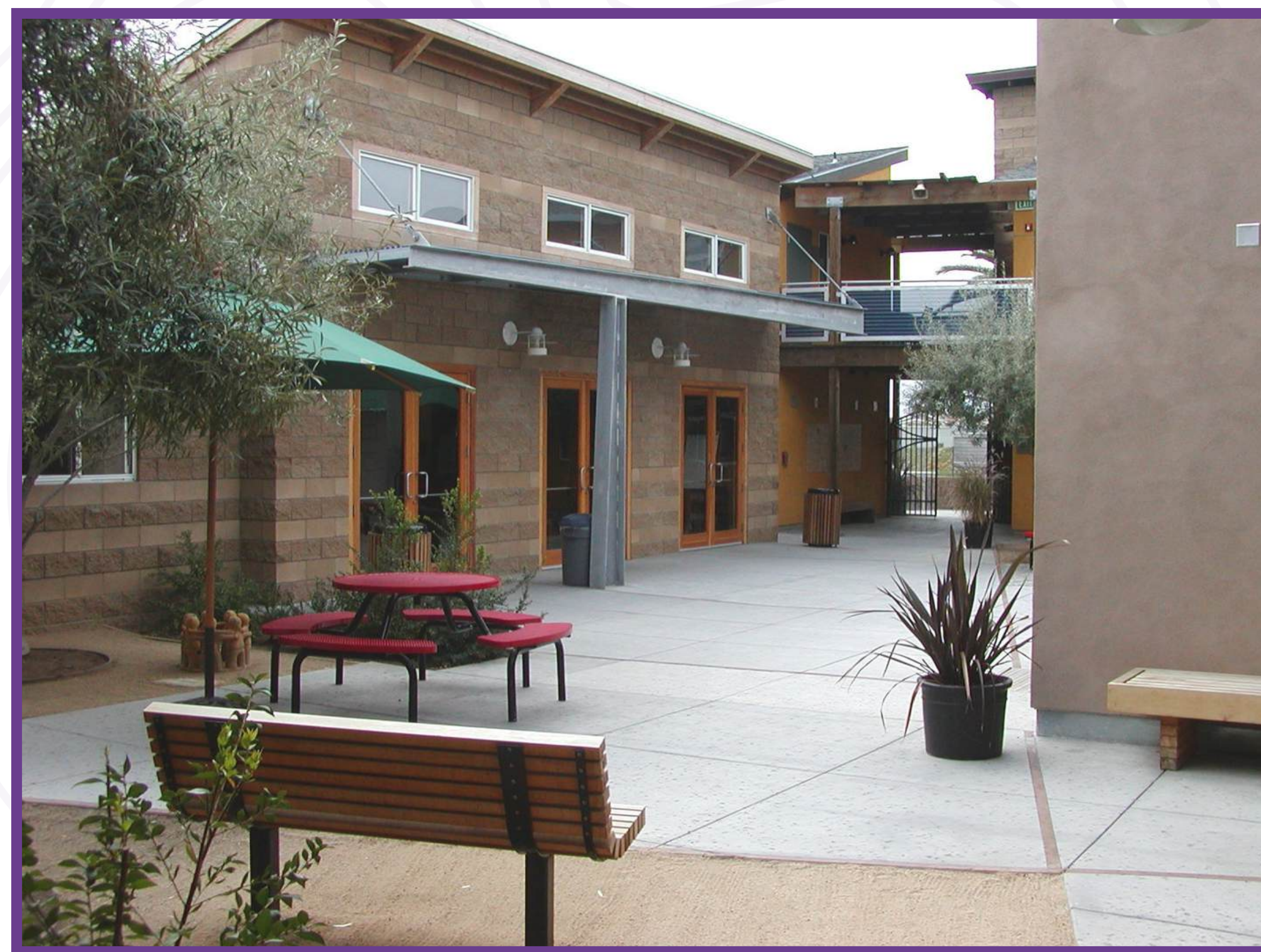
Central Avenue Stairs - 2000

1994: The Central Avenue property is purchased with support from Councilmember Christine Kehoe and Housing Trust Fund resources.

1996: A City Development Block Grant supports architect services. Zagrodnik + Thomas is retained and first renderings are completed.

1997: Feasibility study funding supports a major capital campaign. Additional CDBG funding is awarded for the building project.

1998: The capital campaign kicks off with a new brochure. Mayor Maureen O'Connor announces a major commitment to the Central Avenue project.



Central Avenue Courtyard - 2000

1999: The residential program moves offsite to allow demolition and rebuilding of the facility. A floor of the former Bayview Hospital is converted to house the program during construction.

2000: A ribbon-cutting ceremony in April celebrates the new building and the community that made it possible. Residents return on June 19th. The building's rooms are named to honor the history of the prior facility — Grand Central, The White House, Twilight, Animal House, and Old Globe. Tigger Lounge is named after the property cat. Bayview is chosen in memory of the year spent offsite.



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2000-2018

Built. Tested. Still Standing.

Larger Context: The 2000s are the decade in which the evidence base for integrated behavioral health care — the simultaneous treatment of mental health, substance use, and physical health — moves from academic promise to policy momentum.

For a community-based organization like Stepping Stone, operating in the real world of resource constraints, community relationships, and population-specific need, this era brings both validation and pressure.

The emerging evidence base confirms that what they have been doing for years matters. The professionalization of the field raises the bar for documentation, clinical standards, and systems integration



2000: After six years of renting, \$350,000 in HOPWA funds supports the purchase of Enya House in Hillcrest — a permanent home for recovery for people living with HIV/AIDS.

2001: Proposition 36 program begins at the Hillcrest Center (treatment instead of incarceration).

2002: First Living Out Loud events begin; Positive Support Services leases offices to provide outreach to bars, parks, and streets.

2003: Sexual Behavior Relapse Program begins with multi-year funding. The meth crisis is identified as a major driver of need in the community.

2005: Program success leads to training other providers. An international visiting delegation is hosted. Strategic planning and capacity expansion efforts are funded.

2007: Dual diagnosis services expand with additional funding.

2008–2015: Stepping Stone faces its most difficult chapter. The day treatment program is removed. Sober living is reduced. Funding is partially lost. At its lowest point, capacity drops to 41 people between the residential program and a single sober living residence. Through it all, a dedicated staff continues to provide life-changing services — smaller, stretched thinner, but never gone.

2015: A board-led reorganization and a reconnection to the community power a financial turnaround. Cheryl Houk returns as Executive Director.

2018: Outpatient treatment services return with the opening of Stepping Out, followed by new sober living homes in North Park. By 2019, Stepping Stone is serving over 110 clients at a time — nearly three times the number from just five years earlier.



INNOVATION AT STEPPING STONE

How We Do This Differently.

Most treatment programs weren't built for the LGBTQ+ community. Stepping Stone was. Over 50 years, that difference has shaped every decision about how care is designed, delivered, and sustained.

A community model from the start. The original Stepping Stone was a collection of houses, named by their residents, organized around shared living and mutual accountability. That principle has never changed. Today, residential treatment, outpatient services through Stepping Out, mental health support, and sober living homes work as an integrated continuum designed to address the whole person. Recovery is the foundation. Housing, mental health, and community connection flow from it.

Meeting people where they are. When meth was devastating the community in the early 2000s, Stepping Stone didn't wait for people to find a phone number. Outreach went directly to bars, parks, and streets. The Sexual Behavior Relapse Program launched to address what the community was actually facing. When Proposition 36 created a path from incarceration to treatment, Stepping Stone opened the Hillcrest Center to meet it.



Staff Photo - 2005



Staff who understand because they've lived it.

Many of Stepping Stone's clinicians and support staff are themselves part of the LGBTQ+ and recovery communities. Clients don't have to explain what it means to navigate coming out, family rejection, or discrimination while trying to get sober. Their providers already know.

Building recovery into the neighborhood. From the five original houses on Central Avenue to today's sober living homes in North Park, Stepping Stone has always integrated recovery into community life. Scattered-site housing puts people in real neighborhoods, connected to the daily rhythms of a life worth staying sober for.

Alumni who stay. At most treatment programs, graduation is goodbye. At Stepping Stone, alumni come back -- to lead groups, to mentor new residents, to share a meal, to remind someone in their first week that it gets better. Some return as staff. Some serve on the board. Some just keep showing up, year after year, because the community that helped them get sober is still their community. Generations of alumni maintain these connections, and that continuity is part of what makes recovery here work. New residents don't just hear that recovery is possible. They see it, sitting across from them.

Alumni Picnic, 1998.



WOMEN OF STEPPING STONE

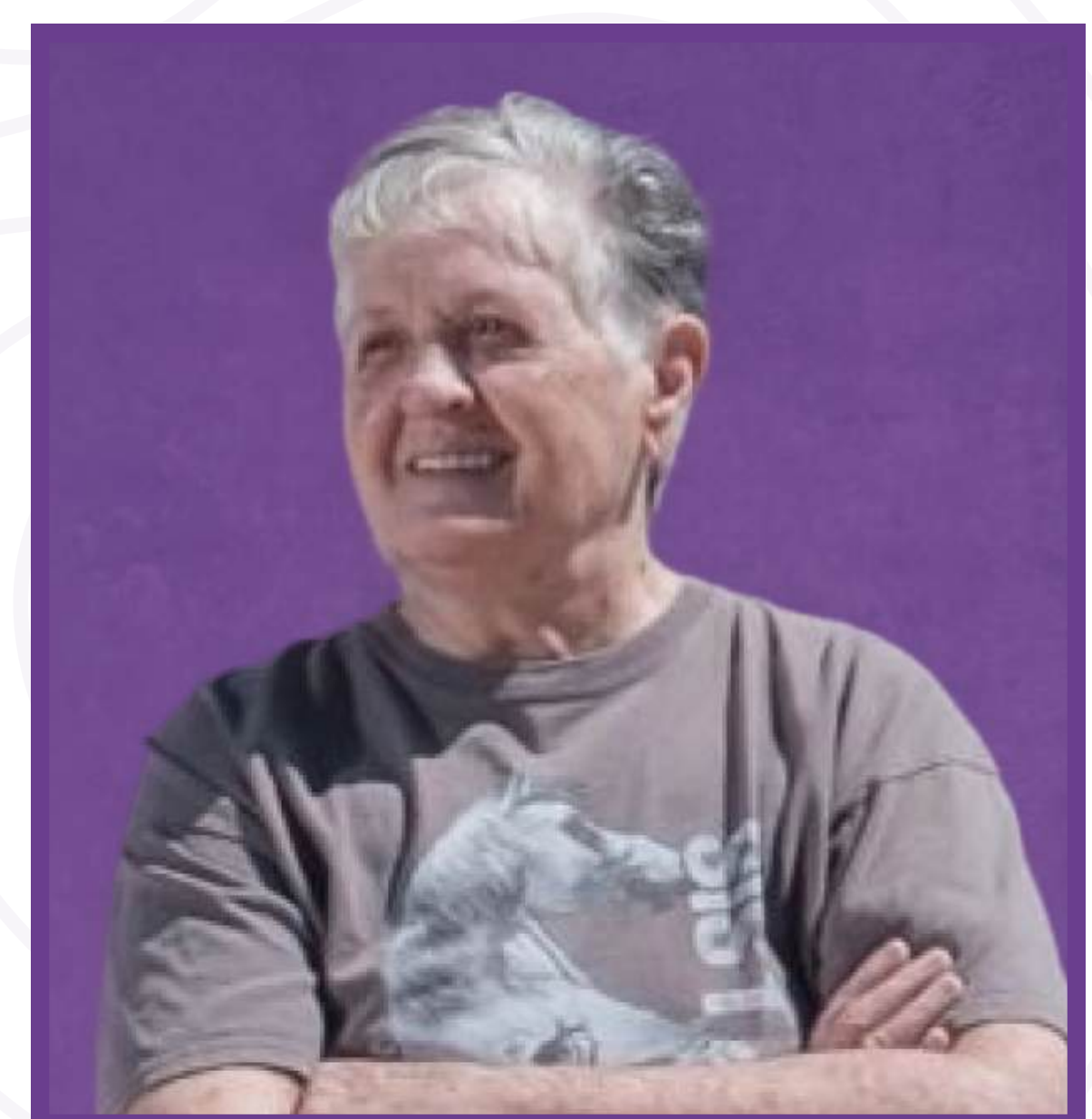
They Led. They Stayed. They Built.



Nolin

Strong, determined, and newly sober, **Nolin** decided to channel her energy into building something that gave LGBTQ+ people a place to get sober. Joining in 1977, she helped find the property on Central Avenue, managed the program for a year, and later served as board chair. The year she managed the residence, the clients were so committed to their sobriety that they supported each other through zero relapses. She has continued to be an advocate for women and the LGBTQ+ community ever since.

While serving others in AA, **Arlene Jeanneret** saw firsthand the LGBTQ+ people looking for help with nowhere to go. She was part of the dedicated group of sober people who founded Stepping Stone, secured the first location, and led fundraising efforts from the very start. She served for years on the board and a time as board chair. She continues to be a force in recovery, freely sharing her experience, strength, and hope – and her marbles too.



Arlene Jeanneret



Christine Kehoe

In 1994, City Councilmember **Christine Kehoe** helped make one of the most consequential decisions in Stepping Stone's history possible: the purchase of the Central Avenue property. By connecting the organization to Housing Trust Fund resources, she helped turn a rented collection of houses into a permanent home -- the foundation on which The Stone would eventually be built. Her support was a reminder that political allies willing to show up for LGBTQ+ communities can change what's possible.

When **Cheryl Houk** joined Stepping Stone as Administrator in 1989, she helped transform a community-born effort into a sustainable organization. With two full-time employees and a modest budget, she laid the operational groundwork that would support decades of growth. By 2010, she had become a board member and was honored by Lambda Archives as a Hero, Pioneer, and Trailblazer. Her arc with Stepping Stone is a story of someone who believed in the work enough to grow with it.



Cheryl Houk



Tracie Jada O'Brien

Tracie first arrived at Stepping Stone as a client on December 25, 1991, beginning her journey in sobriety. Her experience in recovery evolved into a commitment to helping others on the same path. In 1998, she began working at Stepcrest as an outreach worker while pursuing her certification as a counselor. After becoming certified, she served as a Substance Abuse Counselor and later Coordinator of Outpatient Services until 2003. Since then, Tracie has become a powerful advocate for the transgender community, advancing services, support, and visibility for those seeking care and connection.

Alice Henry-Taylor first came to Stepping Stone in 1984, where she worked as an employee for two years. Since that time, she has remained a dedicated volunteer and a constant source of support for clients in the program. Over the years, Alice has led groups, organized hikes, and offered steady guidance to those in recovery, bringing her signature humor and a deep belief in its power to heal. Alongside her husband Ross Taylor, who served as board chair before becoming a volunteer, she helped create a lasting impact on the community they served. For many, Alice has become chosen family. In 2016, the Alice and Ross Service Award was established in their honor, recognizing an individual each year who reflects their spirit of service.



Alice Henry-Taylor

Summer Volunteer Dinner, Alice and Frankie, 1998.



HISTORY OF CELEBRATION

We Gathered.
We Laughed.

Larger Context: Galas and fundraisers are easy to dismiss as just that -- fundraisers. But for an LGBTQ+ recovery organization, gathering is the point. Every event where the community shows up visibly, celebrates openly, and stands alongside people in recovery pushes back against the isolation and stigma that drive substance use in the first place. These events don't just raise money. They build the community that makes recovery possible.

1990: The first annual gala launches and becomes a key community fundraising tradition.

1991: Halloween programming reflects what would become a pattern at Stepping Stone: events that are both cultural celebration and community fundraising.

2002: The first of the Living Out Loud events launch as both a cultural and fundraising platform. Years of events follow, featuring entertainment from Leslie Jordan, Kathy Griffin, Judy Tenuta, and more.

2009: Stepping Stone is recognized as nonprofit of the year at the Transgender Day of Empowerment -- a moment of community celebration and visibility.

2016: Living Out Loud returns for Stepping Stone's 40th anniversary, becoming an annual event. The same year, the Recovery Ride launches -- a cycling fundraiser that runs through 2019, drawing over 200 riders annually and raising critical funds and friendships during the rebuilding years.

2022: Living Out Loud becomes the Pink Gala.

2026: The 50th Anniversary Pink Gala. This exhibit debuts here -- the living continuation of a celebration tradition stretching back to 1990.



The Recovery Ride • Day Zero • January 2019



2016 Living Out Loud Aerial View



Pink Gala 2024 Trixie and Mateo

Recovery Games, 1999.



Recovery Strong. Work Left to Do.

This era is defined by stacked crises -- COVID disruption, rising overdose risk in the fentanyl era, housing instability, and deepening mental health strain -- alongside major organizational growth to meet the need. Stepping Stone's 50th anniversary is not nostalgic. It is a present-tense case that LGBTQ+ specialized addiction recovery, mental health, and housing services remain essential, and scalable.



Pride 2023

2020: COVID reduces capacity in residential treatment due to social distancing requirements. A major outbreak in December forces the facility to close and relocate residents to temporary housing -- the first time in 20 years the property stands empty. Stepping Out shifts to telehealth.

2023: After a national search, Andrew Picard is hired as Executive Director, marking a new leadership chapter focused on expansion, partnerships, and visibility.

2024: Residential is back to full capacity at 31 beds, with nearly 60 beds now serving clients countywide. Outpatient services expand in reach and volume, reflecting increased demand for culturally competent LGBTQ+ addiction recovery and mental health care.



Pride 2024

2024: Stepping Stone receives one of the largest CDBG grants in its history to support a major building renovation - an investment in long-term infrastructure and accessibility.

2026 Fifty years. A staff of approximately 40 -- the largest in Stepping Stone's history -- delivers care across the full continuum. The annual operating budget has grown from roughly \$3M to \$5M.

What recovery built. Thousands of people have walked through Stepping Stone's doors over five decades. Many have walked back -- as counselors, volunteers, board members, mentors, and donors. Alumni lead groups, sponsor newcomers, show up at events, and carry the mission into their families, workplaces, and communities. They are the living proof that recovery works. Every person who rebuilds their life at Stepping Stone becomes a reason someone else believes they can too.

The work left to do. LGBTQ+ individuals still face substance use disorders at two to four times the rate of the general population. San Diego lost its only LGBTQ+ sober Alano club in 2022. Nationally, specialized recovery services for the LGBTQ+ community remain scarce. Demand for Stepping Stone's programs consistently outpaces available space. The need is not shrinking. It is growing -- and so must the capacity to meet it.

