

**Transgender Day of Remembrance: Honoring Lives
and Building a Safer Community in Gilroy**

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Each year on November 20, communities across the world including here in Gilroy take part in the Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR). It is a solemn day dedicated to honoring the memory of transgender and gender-diverse individuals who have lost their lives to anti-transgender violence. Beyond remembrance, it serves as a call to action, a reminder that every person deserves safety, respect, and the freedom to live authentically.

The Transgender Day of Remembrance began in 1999, when activist Gwendolyn Ann Smith organized a vigil in memory of Rita Hester, a Black transgender woman murdered in Massachusetts the previous year. The lack of media coverage and public concern surrounding her death inspired Smith to create a day that would not allow such lives to be forgotten. That first vigil, attended by a small group of advocates, has since evolved into a global observance recognized by human rights organizations, schools, places of worship, and city governments around the world.

In Gilroy, TDOR holds relevance as the city continues to make visible progress in supporting its LGBTQ+ and transgender community members. Over the past few years, a few milestones have demonstrated the power of local action and inclusion.

One of the most significant moments came in August 2025, when Gilroy held its first-ever Pride festival. Organized by the volunteer group Pride Social South County, the event brought color, energy, and unity to the heart of the city. The celebration included drag performances, folklórico dancers representing LGBTQ+ Latinx culture, resource booths, and community outreach. For many residents, especially younger members of the transgender and nonbinary community, the event represented something they had never experienced locally public affirmation and joy in being themselves.

The inaugural Pride celebration was not just symbolic; it reflected a shift in Gilroy's civic culture. For years, residents seeking LGBTQ+ spaces had to travel to larger nearby cities such as San Jose or San Francisco. Hosting Pride at home demonstrated that Gilroy's own residents were ready to embrace diversity and that the city's future includes every identity, including transgender and gender-diverse people.

Support for transgender and queer youth has also been growing steadily. The LGBTQ Youth Space, an organization based in Santa Clara County, has hosted "Safe Space" meetups for queer and trans youth at the Gilroy Library since 2017. These gatherings, open to people ages 13 to 25, provide a welcoming environment where young people can

connect, learn, and express themselves freely. They also serve as an important link to mental health services and educational resources, which can be harder to access in smaller communities.

Programs like these fill a critical need. Nationally, transgender youth face high rates of bullying, family rejection, and mental health challenges, often compounded by a lack of supportive institutions. In Gilroy, Safe Space programs provide a local foundation of care, ensuring that young people do not feel invisible or isolated.

Gilroy's municipal leadership has also taken visible steps toward inclusion. Since 2021, City Hall has flown the Progress Pride Flag each June during Pride Month. The updated design incorporates light blue, pink, and white (colors of the transgender flag) as well as brown and black stripes to represent LGBTQ+ people of color. The annual flag raising ceremony has become a civic event marked by community attendance, advocacy speeches, and local participation.

For many Gilroy residents, the flag serves as a visible reminder that inclusion is part of the city's identity. Public gestures like these are meaningful not only because they acknowledge diversity, but because they help foster a sense of safety and belonging for those who have too often felt excluded or unseen.

Still, progress has not come without challenges. In February 2024, hate-speech graffiti was discovered at Christopher High School, shaking local educators and families. Although the incident was quickly condemned and removed, it underscored ongoing issues of bias and discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ students, including transgender youth. The event prompted renewed discussion among school officials, teachers, and parents about the importance of inclusive education and proactive anti-bullying efforts.

Local advocates emphasize that addressing such incidents requires both accountability and community engagement. While remembrance honors lives lost, real change happens when schools, neighborhoods, and families work together to create safer environments. In this way, the lessons of TDOR reach beyond memorial observances; they extend into classrooms, homes, and public spaces.

Gilroy's efforts to support its transgender person and LGBTQ+ residents mirror a larger national trend toward visibility and advocacy. Yet statistics continue to show that violence and discrimination against transgender people, particularly Black and Latina transgender women, remain a serious concern. According to advocacy organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign, dozens of transgender people are killed each year in the United States, with many cases going unreported or misidentified.

The Transgender Day of Remembrance provides a space to confront these realities while also recognizing resilience and hope. It reminds communities that progress depends on collective commitment from civic institutions and advocacy groups to neighbors and friends.

In Gilroy, that commitment can be seen in multiple forms: a Pride flag flying above City Hall, youth gathering safely at the public library, residents standing together in celebration rather than division. These efforts reflect the city's evolving understanding of diversity as strength and inclusion as a shared responsibility.

As candles are lit and names are spoken during Transgender Day of Remembrance events across the country, Gilroy joins in this reflection. The observance is not only about honoring those lost to violence but also about affirming the lives still being lived by those who continue to fight for authenticity, dignity, and belonging.

Each story, each act of remembrance, is a reminder that building a compassionate community requires persistence and empathy. Whether through education, public policy, or simple human kindness, Gilroy has an opportunity to model what an inclusive future can look like. The Transgender Day of Remembrance calls upon all of us residents, leaders, educators, and allies to ensure that no one is forgotten and that everyone has a place to call home.