

The 2022 Appalachian Studies Association (ASA) conference marked the 10th (mostly) annual “Camp Happy Appalachee (CHA)” LGBTQIA+ reception since the inaugural event held at the 2011 conference. This gathering welcomes all LGBTQIA+—identifying folks and allies in an inclusive, comfortable, and private environment in partnership with ASA, the University of Kentucky (UK) Appalachian Center, and local conference organizers and campus communities.

In 2009, my partner Timi Reedy and I organized some local diversity workshops and resources with support from the Appalachian Community Fund (ACF) LGBTQ Initiative, including a short-lived social network called “Camp Happy Appalachee.” Timi and I co-presented at the 2010 conference and attended some of the panels focused on queer identity in Appalachia. It was clear from the presentations, audience feedback, and casual conversations that there was a significant need for more targeted resources for the Appalachian queer community.

We decided to reach out to the local planning committee of the 2011 conference at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) about including an LGBTQIA+ networking reception to foster dialogue and relationship-building. We also received funding support from the ACF LGBTQ Initiative and partnered with the Program Coordinator for the ECU-SAFE program, which offered the use of their campus “safe space” for the gathering.

This first event included a brainstorming session to document existing resources that I compiled and shared as a crowd-sourced bibliography with everyone as follow-up. Participants enjoyed the food and fellowship, and they were especially pleased that the reception was incorporated into the formal conference program and hoped it would continue as an annual event. We donated leftovers to the STAY Project fundraiser organized by Ada Smith later that same evening.

I continued coordinating CHA with conference organizers each year with fiscal sponsorship from the UK Appalachian Center when I became a doctoral student. We attempted to organize a second annual CHA reception for the 2012 ASA Conference, which was included in the program but unfortunately did not happen due to some logistical mix-ups. The annual event resumed in 2013 and has continued annually every year except for the 2020 conference cancellation due to the COVID-19 quarantine.

CHA attendees represent a diversity of gender and racialized identities as well as a broad age range and demographic of conference participants, including high school students, undergrads, graduate students, faculty, and community members. Average attendance at the annual reception has been about 20 people with more than 30 participants some years. Some people reported that it was their first time attending the ASA conference and that the reception made them feel welcome and wanting to come back again. Many participants over the years have also joined the related Facebook group that I co-manage, which currently has 156 members and serves as a private network for sharing scholarly, activist, artistic, and social resources, events, etc.

The reception always includes a good variety of high-quality food, and it is a valued space that often provides a free healthy meal and important social support for queer and allied youth attending the conference. Sharing leftover food continues as an intentional goal since the very first event. When possible, we direct leftovers to other conference activities, and participants are

always welcome to take food with them. The only non-catered CHA event was in 2021 when ASA organized an entirely virtual conference due to the pandemic.

When possible, we seek to collaborate with campus LGBTQIA+ resource centers, which sometimes co-host in their spaces, as well as related ASA constituents and programming. For example, the second CHA in 2013 gathered in the same location as the “Queer Appalachia” art exhibit featuring life-size quilt portraits. Similarly, organizers of the 2019 ASA conference allocated a space for the Queer Caucus to gather/relax throughout the conference, which also served as the location for the CHA reception.

Camp Happy Appalachee is just one aspect of ASA’s commitment to ensuring inclusion of LGBTQIA+ communities within Appalachian studies, which includes the Queer Caucus, Y’ALL, and increasing representation of LGBTQIA+ scholarship and participants throughout the conference program and presentations. Furthermore, CHA owes its existence and continuance to the visionary contributions of ASA members like Kate Black, Jeff Mann, and the late Okey Napier (aka Ilene Over) who published and presented LGBTQIA+ scholarship, literature, and performance as early as the 1990s. It is this legacy that CHA strives to maintain and honor and that also makes possible the most recent *Journal of Appalachian Studies* (Vol. 28, No. 1) as the first queer-themed issue in its history.

Plans for the next CHA reception at the 2023 ASA conference at Ohio University are already underway. On behalf of Camp Happy Appalachee attendees and supporters over the years, I share our collective gratitude for the continued support from ASA, the UK Appalachian Center, and host campuses for making this valuable, intergenerational networking reception an annual tradition.

#### **Note**

The name “Camp Happy Appalachee (CHA)” incorporates several individual and collective plays on words that reflect and complicate queer/Appalachian identities. Queer-associated notions of “camp” and “campiness” are perhaps the most obvious, and “happy” is both a synonym for “gay” as well as “pride.” “Appalachee” is a play on “Appalachian” and represents both the playfulness and contention of “correct” pronunciation and claims to authenticity. Combined, the phrase creates another nuanced play on words and metaphor for symbolic spaces like “summer camp” where people might come to understand, accept, and embrace parts of themselves that their regular reality might not foster.

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