

Sangha Voices: Cheryl Schaffer

CIMC has a rich history of practitioners, teachers, staff, and volunteers all committed to practicing meditation together in community. Sangha Voices is way for us to deepen our connections and get to know one another better. We will be interviewing members of each of CIMC's many [Community Groups](#). These Groups provide regular opportunities for new and experienced practitioners to participate at the Center in the company of others whose life experiences may be similar to their own.

This month, Zeenat Potia spoke with **Cheryl Schaffer**, a community member of CIMC's **LGBTIQ Sangha**. This sangha, led by CIMC Core Teacher Madeline Klyne, provides a dedicated practice space at CIMC for people who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning. Meetings are held eight times a year on Friday evenings from 7:00-9:00pm.



ZP: How did you hear about the LGBTIQ Sangha?

Cheryl: Madeline, who was the Executive Director at the time, was a signal of safety, and one of the reasons that I first came to CIMC about 15 years ago. People who identify as lesbian, gay, or as a sexual minority are born into families that don't expect us, are unprepared for us, and are often confused by us. I was brought up Christian, and the message is that God doesn't love you for who you are. This disruption to spiritual development can be quite profound. Understandably LGBTIQ folks may have an ambivalent relationship to spiritual practice and religious institutions. Madeline being in a leadership role at CIMC was a very reassuring message, and the LGBTIQ Sangha operates in the same way. The fact that it exists is a welcome mat that says, "We recognize and value you, and we want you here."

ZP: Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Cheryl: I started practicing in 1981 at the Insight Meditation Society. Even though I was completely hooked after that, my practice really took hold after I came to CIMC and became steadier. In terms of work, I've been lucky to have had many rich and connecting experiences. I currently serve as the CFO at the Union of Concerned Scientists; we bring science to bear on some of the world's most pressing problems. Prior to this, I've worked with the AIDS Action Committee and labor unions. I live in Brookline, my two kids are now grown at 28 and 34, and I have a new granddaughter, Victoria who was just born last September.

ZP: What purpose and value does the LGBTIQ Sangha provide to you?

Cheryl: It's a chance to meet other gays and lesbians, to be in community, and to practice.

It is a warm, safe space for newcomers. Madeline has a wonderful teaching about how being gay and coming out is very akin to practice and growing levels of awareness in terms of what people eventually face and overcome, and you probably need to be gay to fully understand what she means. The particular "barb" that your sexual preference is wrong takes a while to untangle and remove. The observer's distance in practice allows one to see things the way they are, and to accept themselves fully.

Even in environments that are not particularly homophobic, having a community that gathers where people are proactively positive about these identities is enormously important. For many people being in a larger gay community is an experience of great joy, humor, and acceptance, and can be a catalyst for incredible creativity, lightness, and fun. Madeline also makes space for announcements related to wider LGBTIQ events and practice opportunities. It's like a community bulletin board.

ZP: If you were to invite somebody to come check out the Sangha, what would you say?

Cheryl: Madeline is a really interesting teacher, and it's a precious opportunity, which is not so common, to practice with other gay people.

ZP: Who or what is inspiring you currently?

Cheryl: The women who started Black Lives Matter, many of whom are queer, and their extraordinary vision and leadership. I just finished reading Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, a speculative novel about climate change. In my Kalyana Mitta group, focused on studying race, we are listening to the 1619 podcasts, which are all incredible.

ZP: Thank you, Cheryl!