



Camp, But Make It Gay:
A Conversation with Pepa Paniagua

June 29, 2023

Transcript



Sara Hayden: Pepa, thank you so much for being here today.

Pepa Paniagua: Hi. Glad to be here. Thanks for asking.

Sara: Well, you have such a timely narrative to share. We are like on the cusp of, as we're talking today, the end of school, the beginning of summer.

Pepa: Mm-hmm.

Sara: And in your work, so much of it revolves around. The experience of people coming together for something very special in the summer called Kin-dom Camp.

Pepa: Yeah.

Sara: So I thought it might be fun based on the timing of the year for you to maybe tell us a little bit about how that came to be.

Pepa: Yeah, so it's end of May, so it's go time for us. And what's fun is this year I'm living more into the end of school rhythm than I maybe ever have because the three wonderful young adults that I work with are all finishing school. (laughs)

Sara: (laughs)

Pepa: So two are graduating from graduate school and one just finished a year of college. And so everything has been marching up to this point and now they're like, we gotta crunch it out and then we'll be ready to go for it for camp.

Sara: (laughs)

Pepa: So the end of school vibe is strong this year and I've just been kind of like, "Are y'all okay? Is everybody still breathing and eating and drinking water?" But yeah, we are gearing up for year two of Kin-dom Camp. So Kin-dom Camp came to be because of the dream of Andy Hackett. Andy Hackett is one of the young adults that I work with, and he is a lifelong camper, like loves camp and grew up going to camp that specializes for folks with gluten sensitivity. So he goes to the Great Gluten Escape, which is such a fun camp.

And it was like the one formative experience for him. Well, one of the formative experiences for him where he got to experience what it was like to not have to worry if food was safe or if all the things were safe. And to do that in a camp environment, he began to wonder as a member of the community, the LGBTQIA community, what it would be to have camp. That welcomed folks and gave LGBTQIA+ youth the same kind of freedom and flexibility to come and not have to worry if the curriculum was safe or if the bathrooms were gendered, or if their sleeping arrangements would be all the things, right? All the things that members of the community have to carry every day.

And so in 2020, he called me to come out to camp and baptize him, which was beautiful and lovely. And just kind of offhandedly afterwards he was like, "So I've been talking with Garrett." And Garrett is another member of our staff, also a young adult who I've known since he was probably 12. "We've been talking and we have this idea for gay camp." (laughs)

Sara: (laughs)

Pepa: Like, camp, but make it gay. And I was like, "Great. Okay. Sounds good."

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: And he goes, "And we thought of you because you just launched Kin·dom Community and it's specifically for members of the community and you yourself are in the community and you get it." And so I offhandedly was like, "Sure, yeah, no problem. We can do that." Thinking Andy at the time was, like, fresh 18, about to start school, would never remember.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: Whatever, right? So I was like, fine. And then he called me a year later and said, "So about that."

Sara: (laughs)

Pepa: "About that camp." And I walked with him and Garrett and we just started the process. And the beauty of this is that as a pastor, I'm used to going to camp and showing up in like either a keynote role or like a spiritual advisor role, right. I've never been a camp director, but Andy and Garrett knew what to do. And so we worked with our host site and got it going and Kin·dom Camp 2022, we launched and welcomed 58 young people and 45 staff.

Sara: Wow.

Pepa: It was incredible. Yeah, it was amazing. (laughs) And so we're gearing it for a year two.

Sara: Wow.

Pepa: Which is wild.

Sara: That's amazing.

Pepa: Mm-hmm.

Sara: I have thousands of things I wanna ask you now.

Pepa: Yeah.

Sara: Just, like, I wanna hear all the details, too.

Pepa: Yeah.

Sara: Two things. One is the connection that happened between you as a new worshipping community leader that was known the community and you for being fully welcoming...

Pepa: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... of people's queer identities, celebrating that. How you see that intersection of, like, your witness personally and being someone to whom someone else could come and be like, "I don't wanna just share this idea. I wanna know that this idea can blossom in this relationship."

Pepa: That's a great question. The idea of witness, right?

Sara: Yeah.

Pepa: And identity. So I came out later in life and I was already ordained and had lived a whole life as an ordained pastor before I met my now wife. And so many of the people in my life talk about before Kelly and after Kelly. (laughs) Kelly is my wife. And when we fell in love and I came out and started living fully, authentically as me, everything about my ministry changed, right? And I no longer had patience, I think is the right word. I no longer had patience for spaces that weren't anything other than affirming.

Right now so much of my work is to help places become affirming and to welcome people and to learn how to do that without causing harm. But I looked at the landscape around here, we're based in North Texas, and there was no church at the time that I would feel comfortable going to work at. There were very few churches that would've hired me. And that, coupled with the fact that I was then privy to stories of people who had been harmed and people who had left church, and people who were hungry for community and space to belong. And I just said, "Okay, let's try."

I entered into this new worshipping community work almost because I couldn't not. There was a place in my spirit that wouldn't let me rest until I tried to do something about it.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: As a lifelong Presbyterian, I love our church, I love its traditions, I love everything about it, right? And I'm deeply committed to the good of it. And then also deeply committed to doing what I can to try to leave it better and more expansive than I found it. And so that has been what has marched me forward. And because I've been in this context of North Texas for as long as I have, I've been here 16 years.

Sara: Wow.

Pepa: I have a long-standing history with the folks here. I've served in multiple churches and I know a lot of the young people and I know a lot of the not so young people. I honestly believe God just said, "Okay, here is where we can do this." Like, "Here's where..." like, not to sound corny, but like the longing of my heart met the need of the world around me. And I was able to use those relationships in ways that could benefit so that when someone like Andy, who I had met when Andy was a teenager... Like I met Andy as a camper. He was someone then that through other relationships with people like Garrett and then the, the staff at the camp where we are knew that I was safe to come to, right? And knew that I would hear him.

And I think because I was in youth ministry for so long, I have this innate understanding in me that young people will often teach us so much if we just give them the space and the resources to do it. And so with camp, I was really quick to say early on, like, yes, I am the executive director. I'm the founding pastor of Kindom Community, but camp would not happen if it were just me.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: Camp is Andy's baby, and through the hard work of Andy and Garrett and Bailey, my staff camp wouldn't happen without them. And so, so much of my role, I think, is just creating space and creating a runway and leveraging the resources and the experience that I have to help craft this thing so that when it does happen, it can happen in a way that's sustainable.

Sara: Yeah.

I wanna ask you about some of the practical considerations that you mentioned...

Pepa: Mm-hmm.

Sara: What does that mean in terms of, as you said, housing?

Pepa: Mm-hmm.

Sara: The schedule. The bathrooms.

Pepa: Right.

Sara: How can camp be set up in a way that's truly serving the purposes...

Pepa: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... of making this a place where people can bring their whole selves and thrive in that context?

Pepa: Yeah. So, at the camp where we are, our host camp and our home camp, we were able to work with them because they were open, right? We were willing to work with them and their board to essentially eliminate gender altogether from spaces. So we would put up signs. Like, year-round their bathrooms are gendered, but we put up signs covering them, saying like, catchy things like "This bathroom has been freed from the gender binary."

Sara: (laughs)

Pepa: Or, "We don't care if you sit or stand, just make sure you wash your hands."

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: Like things like that, right?

Sara: Yeah.

Pepa: So silly things, but we also then made sure that there were trash receptacles in all the stalls.

Sara: Yeah.

Pepa: And our camp sleeping arrangements, we were just upfront about it and said, "Hey, we will have adults." The cabins, there are two bunk rooms with a middle room.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: And we said, we're gonna do this by age. So we have age groups that are grouped together.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: With adults, three adults. And so we just eliminated gender at the start. And what I will say is, as a longtime youth minister, that was like the most liberating thing ever. And then I wondered like, why has this been a deal? There is space, I think for us to not be bound by that...

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: ... in some really meaningful ways. Like granted, we have to have then honest conversations about relationships that develop and flirting and all the things, but it was really beautiful to watch the kids come and recognize that we weren't gonna make them choose.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: And that we weren't gonna ask them to step into a box that doesn't fit.

Sara: Yeah. Are you eliminating gender? Are you eliminating the gender binary?

Pepa: Yeah, we're eliminating the gender binary. So none of the spaces are gendered male or female.

Sara: So there's not a girl's cabin and a boy's cabin?

Pepa: No.

Sara: And a girl's bathroom and a boy's ca... There's sleeping areas with adults present?

Pepa: Correct.

Sara: There's a bathroom that, if you need to go, you go.

Pepa: You just go. Yep.

Sara: Yeah.

Pepa: And we're fortunate. All of the cabins have private bathrooms.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: So the idea of having privacy was really helpful and we could then make a shift easily...

Sara: Yeah.

Pepa: ... to eliminate the binary.

Sara: Yeah.

Pepa: Yeah.

Sara: Someone listening who's like, maybe there are risks associated with elimina... Like, are we confusing children at this ripe stage where they're discovering their identities and it's already hard to be a teenager?

Pepa: Yeah.

Sara: Why have you stepped into this space versus a space where it's like, "Let me help clarify"?

Pepa: Well, so one of the things we also do at camp is rather than having, like, designated name tags every day...

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: ... we have paper name tags, so like, sorry, environment. But what we do is every morning we give the campers and the staff the invitation to tell us who they are for the day.

Sara: Yeah.

Pepa: Right. So if there's someone who has wanted to try on a different name or a different set of pronouns...

Sara: Wow.

Pepa: ... they have the freedom and flexibility and the invitation and permission to do that. And truthfully, whether young people are in the community or out of the community, clarity can only come through the gift of exploration.

Sara: Wow.

Pepa: Clarity can only come through space to know that they're loved, period. And so yes, is there confusion? Sure.

Sara: (laughs)

Pepa: But, like, if you ask any adult, "Were you ever confused about who you are or what your body-"

Sara: (laughs)

Pepa: "... was doing at a point in your life?" Everybody will say yes.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: So really what we're trying to do is help these young people integrate with their bodies and their identities. Because so much of what they have to do every day in the world is pick either to live fully in their bodies or to live fully in their identities. Or how can they just live in the world and not be a target?

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: So this camp, this space for us, it's a sacred space where they can be free to explore and maybe uncover or identify who they are in ways that they can't in the world.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: We saw some really beautiful things. We had some campers whose name changed every day. And we had some campers who were really hesitant at the invitation and a little worried. And so there was some days where I had to say, "Hey, we're not gonna report back to anybody. This is your space to do and to be who you are." Our only guiding principle is just don't be a jerk, right?

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: Like, just accept that everybody's in a different space with this, and you're welcome to be in the space where you are. No question. Just lots of support and love.

Sara: Yeah. What's the best thing about camp from your perspective?

Pepa: Gosh, so the thing that I remember and the thing that I, on days where I'm like, "Why are we doing this?" Right? Where it gets frustrating or hard, the things that I remember is welcoming these kids in at registration and seeing their fear or their anxiety and their bodies just being closed, right?

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: Like just such hesitation and worry, but then walking in and seeing like, oh, we didn't ask them to identify their gender at the door. (laughs) We didn't ask them, right, like to learn just through the process of walking through and getting registered and getting to your cabin. To see their faces kind of change. And then by the end of the week, to watch them just blossom and be the fullness of who they are or who they're becoming.

One of the things that I wasn't prepared for, but we're learning and we're stepping into it, is there's a huge intersection of neurodivergence among LGBTQIA youth. And so, we had a sensory space and we had accommodations available for folks who needed downtime or needed extra behavioral support and I had one camper who got so overwhelmed by the freedom of the space and the permission of the space that they essentially went non-verbal for a couple of days. And we worked with that. We figured out how to communicate with them.

Sara: Wow.

Pepa: We figured out how to make that work. Luckily, they had one of the best counselors ever who was super patient and super compassionate. This camper was nonverbal and didn't wanna be touched. But by the end of the week, they were up at the variety show and in front of the entire camp started telling jokes and hugged me, right? Like, that's what we get to do. And then felt empowered to go home and say, "Mom and dad, parents, this is who I think I am and is there space for us to continue exploring this and will you support me going forward?" Right?

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: Like so these kids, and I shouldn't even call them kids 'cause they're young people, I think they go away with a sense of empowerment and a sense of knowing that there's this community behind them that loves them and supports them and wants to continue to walk with them.

Sara: Mm-hmm. It's such a tender thing to hear as a parent, to think that a community can open up something in your child that may not have happened in their daily life.

Pepa: Mm-hmm.

Sara: Of course, you being more physically present, maybe more relationally present in the home, your child returns from camp and is able to articulate something that they have discovered about themselves or they're learning about who they are...

Pepa: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... that might be new or might have more to it than there was when they left.

Pepa: Mm-hmm.

Sara: And I think that, of course there are situations of any parent who sends their child away to overnight camp.

Pepa: (laughs) Yeah.

Sara: Hopefully they come back with growth and a new-found sense of identity and things they've learned about themselves that they hold dear.

Pepa: Mm-hmm.

Sara: And as a parent, my heart goes out to the families. Just the blessing and courage it takes to say, "We want you to have this experience."

Pepa: Mm-hmm.

Sara: And what it takes to process on the other side.

Pepa: Right. Well, and that was one of the things that we discovered, and I saw it coming as camp was ending. I was like, "Oh, we have just launched a huge community."

Sara: (laughs)

Pepa: We, it just happened, right?

Sara: Yeah.

Pepa: Like, all this time we've been doing Kin·dom Community and we've had things and we've had gatherings, and we've been trying to just make it work. But then after camp, it changed the entire scope of what we do. And so, so much of what we had to be intentional about, and we're still learning how to lean into this, is how to do aftercare and how to do community building and community support in the in between. And so, one of the things that we heard most quickly was, "Please don't make us wait another year."

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: "We need a touchpoint." So we cobbled together by, like, literally duct tape and the grace of God, a winter retreat.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: And we did it, right? And so, we knew that it was just a weekend, and so it wouldn't be the full camp experience. I shouldn't even say that because what they needed is just space to be.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: And so I didn't realize... I had an idea, but I got to see it up close and personal, how much the families are carrying with their kids.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: Especially here in Texas where it's not great to be gay in the state of Texas right (laughs) now. It's hard. And so there's so much anxiety and fear that these parents hold in trying to protect their kids, right? Like, there was a moment during registration where I got emotional because I was like, these families are trusting us with their babies. Like, they are trusting us with

their babies to come and be here and to be safe and cared for, for a week. And dammit, we have to do it well.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: That's the thing about camp for me. Is we are just entrusted with these lives and these identities and these families and the stories, right? And so we have to be good stewards of them.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Pepa: Yeah.

Sara: It's beautiful.