

Show up, Stand up, Speak up: The Legacy and Career of Deb Murphy

By Logan French

I knew her as a woman who sat behind dark glasses with a nearly constant, slight frown. She was quick to tell you harsh truths, exceptionally stubborn, and possibly loved more intensely than anyone I have ever known. Today, she appears quite different: she wears clear lenses.

This woman is Deb Murphy. Calling herself “as old as dirt,” she plotted her retirement plans for years, which included pouring herself into projects like creating monster movies with friends. Then, on July 17, 2020, after spending eighteen years as an LGBTQ youth advocate, she retired; but until that

moment she had worked tirelessly on the “Hatch Plan for World Domination,” which involves safety

for all LGBTQ youth, especially those in Harris County through Hatch Youth.¹

Deb’s “Proudest Accomplishment”

Throughout her life, Deb has been praised as an important voice in Houston’s LGBTQ community. She received the Montrose Center’s Employee of the Year award in 2010 as well as the 2015 Outstanding Public Citizen Award from the Houston Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. Deb is known for her queer youth advocacy, public speaking, and training workshops throughout the nation. However, she says that her proudest accomplishment is “surviving her childhood” as her parents were “difficult [people] to be raised by.”²

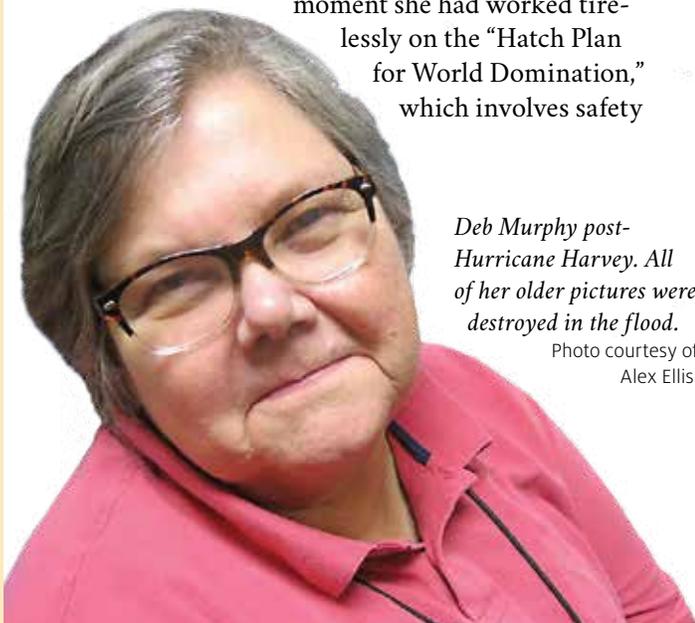
In the 1950s, her parents moved to Chicago as part of the Great Diaspora in which large numbers of Jewish people dispersed or migrated following World War II. Deb was born there in 1955, but the family soon changed course and relocated to Florida where the kids grew up. They moved throughout the state until the family settled in a house in South Florida when Deb was ten years old.

She spent as much time as she could outside, aided by the fact that she was a bike ride away from the Everglades and a short bus ride away from the beach. The outdoors proved to be an escape from her parents who preached the values of education but more often hindered success. This lack of understanding only worsened as Deb discovered her place in the queer community.

The Stonewall uprising took place in New York’s Greenwich Village when she was fourteen years old. She remembers her father pounding his fist on the table and screaming, “Now even the f----- queers are rioting!”³ At this time, she was just realizing that other people were having the same kinds of thoughts she had. This was confirmed when a librarian suggested that she read *The Well of Loneliness*, a lesbian novel. The Stonewall uprising and the book opened her eyes to the queer community that she never knew existed.⁴

Although it had taken Deb a long time to figure out and understand her identity, she failed in hiding it for long from her parents. By age sixteen she had a girlfriend whose parents found their love notes and told Deb’s mother, claiming that Deb had “corrupted” their daughter.⁵ Chaos erupted, and Deb’s family forced her out of the house. After a week of suffering from neighborhood peer pressure, they decided that she could move back in with the stipulation that she move out permanently on her eighteenth birthday.

Despite the obstacles, Deb proved her dedication to her schooling by becoming the first person in her family to graduate from high school. Even this did not change her family’s feelings towards her, so she moved out upon turning eighteen. When she arrived at college, the dorms



Deb Murphy post-Hurricane Harvey. All of her older pictures were destroyed in the flood.

Photo courtesy of Alex Ellis.



Deb Murphy (right) walks with the Hatch Youth banner during a Houston Pride parade. Photo courtesy of the Montrose Center.

also turned her away because of her visibility, so she decided to commute to school from an apartment shared with her girlfriend.

Always more concerned about their image than their daughter, Deb's parents came to her graduation from Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. As she described it, they "showed up, sat there, and then left" without speaking to her. After earning her degree in chemistry and a minor in geology, she moved away from South Florida for the first time since age ten, a decision that shaped the rest of her life.⁶

The Road to "Hatch Mom"

In 1979, at the age of twenty-four, Murphy moved to Houston in what she describes as the "best decision of [her]

life," with staying there being the second. Houston allowed her to use her degree to get work in petrochemical manufacturing. She served in a number of corporate positions and rose quickly up the ranks, starting out as a bench chemist and ending her career as a technical manager. Her job enabled her to travel, earn a solid paycheck, and gain skills important for her work today. However, it also had drawbacks as she was "a young gay woman working in the boy's club ... in a shark tank."⁷ After twenty years, she realized that her heart was no longer in this work and decided to take her life in a new direction. She spent the next three years working odd jobs, including painting curb numbers, freelance writing, consulting work, technical writing and editing, and becoming the Houston Gay and Lesbian Film Festival's first paid staff member.

Soon after Deb wrote an article about Hatch Youth for *OutSmart* magazine in 2002, a paid position opened. She quickly took it and stayed there until she retired, explaining that she could not imagine doing anything else. Hatch Youth is a program of the Montrose Center for queer youth ages thirteen to twenty.⁸

Hatch began after a lesbian teenager at First Unitarian Universalist Church spoke up about the need for a safe support group for lesbian and gay teenagers in the Houston area. Jay Asher and Trish Morgan cofounded Hatch (then Houston Area Teen Coalition of Homosexuals) in 1987 run by volunteers at the church. The group dissolved and seemed to be over until the summer of 1991 when new support and funding became available. At this point, Hatch had become a



Members of Hatch Youth decorate their float in preparation for a Pride parade.

Photo courtesy of the Montrose Center.



Hatch Youth leaders and members strike a pose during a Hatch Prom event. Photo courtesy of the Montrose Center.

registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organization meeting twice a week with programming that included educational presentations from gay professionals, personal development lectures, social time, suicide prevention, and educational or cultural films put on for an average of thirty to forty youth members. In the next few years, Hatch created its annual Hatch Prom, began marching in the annual Houston Pride parade, and started the Hatch Scholarships (now Out For Education).⁹

Hatch has since been reorganized and is now housed in the Montrose Center with two paid positions in addition to many volunteers. Its mission has evolved to include “empowering lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, and allied youth ... by providing a safe and social environment, offering role models and peer support, and sponsoring educational and community outreach opportunities.” Hatch hopes to help build a societal climate that promotes “acceptance

and understanding without regard to sexual identity.”¹⁰ The group meets three times a week for three to four hours and usually includes a social hour, a program hour, and a small group hour for structured conversation.

Deb enjoys being able to watch young queer people grow and learn. Because of Hatch, she was able to provide community and a feeling of safety for kids that have sometimes never felt that. She strives to provide safety for all queer kids and calls this goal the “Hatch Plan for World Domination.”¹¹ To achieve this, Hatch has expanded and put other programs in place, including Hatch Jr. for younger children, and resources for homeless youth, such as a rapid rehousing program. In her last years with the organization, Deb focused on how to take Hatch to those who could not come to the Montrose Center due to transportation or familial issues.

“Hatch Plan for World Domination”

Throughout her life, Deb has seen the LGBTQ community become just that: a community. When she first came out, there were no safe places to go as there are now. In her words, it was “a bunch of queers sitting in a bar, drinking themselves to death.” When she was sixteen, the only place where she could go was the back room of a straight bar called Lou’s Back Room. Lou did not allow them to drink alcohol, and if the cops came, they were to escape through the bathroom window. She still has a scar on her leg from one of those occasions. Despite the obvious danger, these gatherings were incredibly important as they provided scared, young queer people with access to advice from the older people, a sense of community, and knowledge of the



Deb Murphy (far left) joins Hatch Youth members during a fundraising carwash in Montrose.

Photo courtesy of Dalton DeHart.



Deb, at left, joins the royal court from the Montrose Prom in 2008.

Photo courtesy of Dalton DeHart.

existing culture that would otherwise never be discussed. Unfortunately, groups like this also introduced many people to drinking and eventually led to increased alcoholism. The dangers and extreme lack of acceptance caused many of the people to lose their lives at a young age.¹²

In sharp contrast to the past, programs like Hatch now offer community, safety, and support. Although Hatch started out as little-known weekly meetings, in the thirty-four years since then, it has grown to include a variety of services and continues to build new programs in an effort to include as many groups as possible under the queer youth umbrella. The first time that a queer child enters the room, they are greeted by a facilitator or another member and are shown around. There are snacks and drinks available as well as books, games, crafts, and posters providing information about other services in the Montrose Center such as therapy and pediatrics. Projects and programs include the Safe Zones Project, Gay-Straight Alliances, Safe Spaces, Hatch Jr., Phoenix Youth (now on hiatus), and PFLAG, a street outreach team, and a rapid rehousing program. The Safe Zones Project and Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) are peer group meetings held in high schools that offer support to students who may otherwise feel unsafe at school.¹³

Hatch also provides GSA workshop training, and Deb has been asked to speak at GSA meetings in schools. Safe Spaces allows educators to mark their classroom as a safe place for queer students without the risk of bullying. Hatch Jr. is a program with a layout very similar to Hatch, though geared toward kids ages seven to twelve who must be accompanied by a parent or guardian. Phoenix Youth is an LGBT youth of color group that is also very similar to Hatch, but offers services tailored to people of color. PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) is an organization separate from Hatch that seeks to provide support to those who have someone queer in their life and help them cope with these changes.¹⁴

Hatch has not only changed the community of queer

youth, but it has softened Deb's rough exterior and made her more resilient. "You have to help them, but you have to remember that they are not your children even though you parent them." She always tried hard to make everyone in the room safe and comfortable. Her love is recognized, and she is lovingly called "Hatch Mom" by many involved in the program. Because of her devotion to the program, the Hatch meeting room has been named in her honor.¹⁵

Today, Deb says, "there is gay everything," which allows for a vibrant community.¹⁶ Now safe spaces exist. In Houston there is an entire Montrose area, including the Montrose Center, which houses numerous programs for a diverse spectrum of queer people. Deb herself is involved in LOAF, a group for lesbians over age fifty. These different groups reflect an increasing inclusivity.

This community is becoming part of the world, but Deb recognizes that this also means assimilation, and she believes that the price the queer community pays for assimilation is a loss of culture. For example, Pride is becoming "a gay Saint Patrick's Day where once a year everyone's queer."¹⁷ She remembers Pride parades in the early eighties that were family friendly outdoor parties, whereas today they frequently involve large amounts of alcohol and are often deemed inappropriate for children.

"Can't I just have fun for the rest of my life?"¹⁸

During her career, when not working on various Hatch programs or speaking at conferences, Deb liked to "be goofy with [her] friends and do fun stuff."¹⁹ She worked on a series of short monster movies that are Ed Wood-style parodies of 1960s B movie horror genre.²⁰ She has always written and explored many creative outlets, but in recent years, "the visual arts snuck up on [her]." Clearly she is not shy in expressing herself and says her "singing can best be described as croaking," and she "enjoy[s] the hell out of it."²¹

Deb thinks that she will be a "great retired person" who re-

flects the song “Where the Wind Blows” by Coco O. She plans to indulge her creative side and carry on with her favorite hobbies and pastimes.²² She has a box full of projects for retirement, from making a bird mask to creating a board game.

Deb had no timetable for her retirement. Instead she felt that she would know when it was her time to leave. She knows that it is important—especially in organizations that serve youth—to leave at the appropriate time or progress will cease. The younger people need to be allowed to provide the organization with their perspective.

“Show up, Stand up, Speak up”

Deb firmly believes that the way to create change is to “show up, stand up, and speak up.”²³ This can mean many different things and be applied to various situations.

“Showing up” could range from being active in the queer community to deciding against suicide. The estimated suicide-attempt rate for queer youth is twenty-nine percent compared to six percent for heterosexual youth.²⁴ However, Hatch has never lost anyone to suicide. Deb attributes this to the community and resources the program provides. I think that it also has to do with her honesty. I remember several years ago when the news media covered a young transgender girl’s suicide and her note that discussed trying to make change. At the Hatch meeting following the girl’s death, Deb was very serious and sat everyone down. She told us that if we chose the same route, she would come and cry real tears at our funeral; in five or ten years, though, she would no longer remember us. One person, however, would never be able to forget the young transgender girl: the driver that she

stepped in front of on the road, a stark reminder from Deb that death can often impact people we have never met. Deb wanted us to know very well that change can only happen if we stay alive and take part in it.

There are a variety of ways to “stand up.” One is by “simply sitting down and writing a check,” Deb said. Donating to an organization such as Hatch shows support and can greatly aid the work the group is doing.²⁵ In order to keep the lights on and the doors open, services like these need people to stand up and show that they are a necessity that is embraced by the community.

In telling the truth without sugarcoating it, Deb “spoke up.” Her honesty can be brutal, no matter how difficult it is to say or hear when she gives talks like the one following the young girl’s suicide. She remembers telling kids where they could sleep outside when they were kicked out of their homes or felt that they had to run away. According to her, the “hardest thing that she ever had to do” was to help tell a boy’s mother that her son was HIV positive. She feels that it is better to speak up for something that she believes in and be wrong than to have done nothing. Deb hopes to be remembered as a kind person that “told the truth as [she] knew it and encouraged them [the Hatch kids] to seek their own truth.”²⁶

Logan French was born and raised in Houston and recently graduated from the University of Houston Honors College with a B.S. in geology and a minor in energy and sustainability. He plans on attending graduate school and then pursuing a career in environmental hydrogeology.



Author Logan French (fifth from right) marches with Hatch Youth at the 2014 Houston Pride parade.

Photo courtesy of Project Q Atlanta.