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# Pulses of Light

**In the wake of Orlando's worst tragedy, community groups came together to stand united.**

By Lisa Beach



Craig Ustler of Citrus Restaurant.  
Photo provided by FLRA.

**O**rlando United became the catchphrase this summer, as our community climbed out of the shadows of a horrific event that momentarily brought us to our knees. The June 12 massacre at Orlando's Pulse nightclub not only took the lives of 49 innocent victims and injured dozens more, but devastated our region in the process.

But amidst this horror, the light immediately began to shine. Orlando beats with a giving, helping heart, as thousands of people donated blood and attended vigils, and dozens of local organizations stepped up to make a difference. In the days and weeks following the attack, charities, government agencies and civic organizations went above and beyond in helping our community begin to heal. Unlike any other time in history, the entire Central Florida community has demonstrated that we are Orlando United.

## The Mayor's Office

Taking a strong leadership role in the recovery efforts, Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer's office immediately established the Family Assistance Center (FAC) at Camping World Stadium during the week following the shooting. The FAC—a partnership with dozens of federal, state, local and community agencies—initially served more than 600 individuals affected by the Pulse tragedy, helping with travel, lodging, funeral services, child care, counseling, immigration issues and unemployment benefits.

Mayor Dyer also spearheaded the OneOrlando Fund, which was launched to provide critical, long-term support directly to victims' families and survivors. Several similar charities recently

merged with OneOrlando, streamlining the process to expedite funds, ensure transparency and safeguard against fraud. As of June 30, OneOrlando has raised more than \$17 million in donations. (Those who wish to donate can do so at [OneOrlando.org](http://OneOrlando.org).)

"Words cannot express how grateful we continue to be for the outpouring of generosity our community's received from around the globe to deliver the critical help and healing the victims' families and survivors need to aid in their recovery," says Dyer.

The short-term FAC has since transitioned into long-term support, now renamed the Orlando United Assistance Center, a partnership between the City of Orlando, Orange County Government and the United Way. The center serves as a navigation point to assess the needs and provide information, support and resources to those impacted by the Pulse tragedy.

## Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association & Visit Florida

On June 30, the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association (FRLA), a non-profit hospitality industry trade association, partnered with Visit Florida to host a one-day, state-wide fundraiser called "Dine Out for #OrlandoUnited." Nearly 1,500 restaurants participated, raising more than \$750,000 for the OneOrlando Fund.

During the event, guests dined at participating restaurants and made direct donations. Restaurant owners donated a percentage of their daily receipts, and at many participating locations, guests could opt to leave an additional donation on top of the cost of the meal. Employees who wanted to help had the options of working a shift, volunteering

their time or donating a portion of their tips.

"The hospitality industry is the heart and soul of tourism," says Carol Dover, the association's president and CEO, "and we rallied immediately to do something. Pulse is a member of the FRLA, a part of our hospitality family, and we are proud to lend support. When I sat with the owners, a lovely husband-and-wife couple, they're just hurting. It's family for them—their employees and their guests."

## Catholic Charities of Central Florida

Besides the physical and emotional recovery, victims and their families need help in many areas, including rent, utilities, food, gas cards, immigration, counseling and crisis interventions. Catholic Charities of Central Florida opened a temporary office and provided initial assistance to 42 families according to Gary Tester, executive director of Catholic Charities. With the goal of providing ongoing assistance, including a grief and crisis support group, the number of individuals helped will continue to rise.

"We've had a number of folks who had questions about how to get family from Mexico to the funeral or how to get the body of a loved one released and get back home," says Tester, describing some of the difficult tasks his organization handled during approximately 100 hours of volunteer service. "Some folks simply needed a translator."

He shares heart-tugging stories, too, such as one family who couldn't afford to arrange a funeral and one man who got stuck with a lease he couldn't afford when his two roommates went back to Puerto Rico. "It's not a cookie-cutter response," explains Tester.



## Orlando Modern Quilt Guild

"I have so many LGBT friends, family members, guild members, and I knew that someone I know would be directly affected," says Alissa Lapinsky, explaining how her organization, the Orlando Modern Quilt Guild, got involved after the shooting. "Immediately, a quilt drive struck me as something we could do."

The project quickly became an international quilting bee of sorts. Lapinsky, the guild's president, posted the project idea on Instagram. Nine hours later, offers of help poured in from around the world, including Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. Businesses soon jumped on board, too, donating fabric, thread, labels, batting and other quilting supplies. The guild has received dozens of finished quilts and quilt tops as well as hundreds of blocks to be pieced together from all over the U.S., New Zealand, Mexico, Germany, Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands.

The project's original scope quickly burgeoned, with the guild hoping to give quilts to the doctors and nurses who worked on survivors, and to responding EMTs and police officers. The guild plans to wrap up the quilt-making by mid-September and distribute the made-with-love blankets by October—which happens to be Pride month in Orlando.

## Pet Alliance of Greater Orlando

Assistance even came to victims' four-legged family members, as the Pet Alliance of Greater Orlando stepped up to help. Some of the survivors who were still in the hospital recovering from the shooting had pets at home, so the Pet Alliance provided short-term care for those animals. And sadly, the pets of the victims who lost their lives needed to find new homes. Fortunately, the Pet Alliance didn't need to place any pets outside their families, as victims' relatives took in the orphaned pets of their deceased loved ones.

"We were able to assist 25 families," said Steve Bardy, executive director of the Pet Alliance. "We provided temporary shelter for pets, as well as medical and wellness checkups for dogs and cats, dental work, grooming and bathing. We delivered pet food to some families and met out-of-town families at the hospital. We just took care of everything. It was important to be part of the solution."

*Lisa Beach is a freelance writer, humor blogger, mother of two teenagers, and recovering homeschool mom who lived to write about it. More of her writing can be found at [LisaBeachWrites.com](http://LisaBeachWrites.com) and [TweeniorMoments.com](http://TweeniorMoments.com).*

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