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## A POIGNANT POINT OF PRIDE

For this year's LGBTQ community celebration, the Human Rights Campaign wears 49 ribbons, one for each life lost at the Pulse nightclub

Artist Megan Geckler at the Human Rights Campaign offices, where her installation "49" will be illuminated nightly.

BY CAITLIN GIBSON

**I**t began to take shape early this week beneath a heavy gray sky, a bright cone of pure white ribbon streaming from the top of the eight-story building to the ground-floor canopy below.

Passersby on the sidewalk below the Human Rights Campaign headquarters in Dupont Circle paused and stared, raising their iPhones to snap photos of the gleaming fabric strips fluttering in the breeze — 49 in all, one for every life lost in the June 12, 2016, mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando.

By Thursday afternoon, the artwork was complete, as 12 larger panels of fabric in the deconstructed colors of the rainbow flag were added in a larger semicircle, surrounding the white ones. Artist Megan Geckler's installation — titled simply "49" — is meant to reflect the delicate juxtaposition this weekend has come to represent.

On Friday, Washington officially kicked off its 42nd annual Capital Pride festival, a vibrant and storied celebration of the LGBTQ community. And Monday will mark the first anniversary of the deadliest mass shooting in American history — a horror that unfolded in a popular Florida gay bar that had been a cherished place of safety

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## The rainbow, through the prism of Pulse

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and acceptance for a marginalized community.

In the days after the shooting, the staff of the Human Rights Campaign — the nation's largest civil rights organization advocating for LGBTQ equality — com-

memorated the victims by posting their large-scale portraits in the building's floor-to-ceiling windows along 17th Street Northwest. It became a vigil spot where visitors took photographs, wept and left red Post-it notes scrawled with lines of poetry, prayers and promises on a large whiteboard outside the building:

*Love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love.*

*Porque amor queer es amor valiente.*

*I refuse to be afraid.*

This year, amid a political climate that feels particularly fraught for the LGBTQ communi-

ty — President Trump was notably silent when Pride month began on June 1, breaking with President Barack Obama's tradition of issuing a formal proclamation — the advocacy group resolved to do something bold. It contracted with Geckler, a Los Angeles-based artist known for her complex, large-scale installations composed of colorful strips of construction tape.

"We have Pride, and then we have the anniversary of this horrific event, so balancing those two concepts and those two aesthetics was the really big challenge," Geckler said. "I want this to be a

beacon of strength and hope."

HRC President Chad Griffin came to check on the installation's progress on Wednesday afternoon.

"Artists have always been at the forefront of our movement, and often they've been the leaders," he told Geckler. "What I hope, in part, this will do — in addition to being a celebration and a memorial — is inspire other artists."

The HRC headquarters will be open for visitors during Capital Pride, with an exhibit on hate crimes, a rainbow-hued backdrop to pose for Instagram portraits, and stations where people can

send "Love Trumps Hate" postcards to the president, petition their elected leaders or write handwritten messages that will be tied to a lattice panel on the grounds with brightly colored ribbon.

At a twilight ceremony Friday, the names of the Pulse victims were read aloud: Brenda Lee Marquez McCool, the cancer survivor who died shielding her son from a hailstorm of bullets on a crowded dance floor; Akyra Murray, the 18-year-old star student who became the youngest victim of the shooting; Christopher "Drew" Leinonen and his boyfriend, Juan Ramon Guerrero, who shared "a

pure, unconditional love," as one of their friends said at Leinonen's funeral. And so many others.

The vivid installation transforms into a more solemn memorial at dusk, Geckler explained — as darkness dims the bright rainbow panels, soft lights illuminate the white strips, setting the piece aglow from within. The crowds gathered outside will watch and remember in a moment of silence.

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**Megan Geckler's 49** is on display through June at the Human Rights Campaign at 17th Street and Rhode Island Avenue NW.