‘Shared suffering’: How one Oakland gym is pushing back on political hostility

Darcy Vasudev lugs the large barbell over her head, the 1999 chart-topper ‘...Baby One More Time’ by Britney Spears blaring in the background.

The barbell and attached plates — about the equivalent of two carry-on suitcases stuffed to capacity — thud as they hit the rubber-padded ground, only for Vasudev to pick it up again and repeat the movement.

Sweat shines on her forehead, dripping down her buzzed, salt-and-pepper hair — a sign she is nearing the end of the hour-long class at Brightside Barbell in Oakland, California.

“One more,” Vasudev says to coach CE Brooks as the red lettering projecting from an overhead clock reads 1 p.m.

Brooks responds with a cheer, raising their hands above their head in celebration as Vasudev completes the workout and begins to re-rack her gear.

While the equipment and workouts are largely the same, Brightside Barbell isn’t considered a “traditional” gym.

That’s the point.

Founded in 2022 by Brooks and their partner Emily Adams, the space looks to flip the script on the hyper-masculine and often exclusionary practices dominating the fitness industry.

“There's a lot of cop culture, military culture — stuff that I would say borders on toxic masculinity,” Brooks said. “It was not always a fun and safe environment for me to exercise, to compete and to coach.”

Brooks said from its conception, Brightside Barbell was intended to be a third space for people interested in getting more involved in the world of fitness.

However, with recent federal decisions impacting LGBT individuals across the U.S., that mission of cultivating safe spaces and building community has grown more pertinent for Brooks and Adams.

“We are conscious of how the political atmosphere is affecting people's mental health and how they show up,” Brooks said. “So, we're trying to create this space and maintain a space where people can show up as they are.”

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The line of rainbow flags dancing in the breeze down San Francisco's Market Street is underpinned by a harsh reality — the state of California's very public struggle over LGBT rights with President Donald Trump and his administration.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom is far from the first figure or institution to stand against Trump.

Take Harvard's push against Trump in defending their international students, for example. Or the numerous military leaders with concerns regarding Trump's diplomacy and cuts to the VA's budget.

Newsom's fight, however, is a continuation of a fight right-wing politicians have successfully latched on to for the past several election cycles. Anti-LGBT — and specifically anti-transgender — rhetoric has become an increasingly prominent talking point for conservatives, seeping into the federal level.

In the first days of his second term, Trump passed several executive orders impacting transgender individuals, including shifting passport requirements and banning transgender girls from competing in girls' sports.

Historically, the Bay Area has been a sanctuary for the LGBT community.

Cristina Mitra, the program director for the James C. Hormel LGBTQIA+ Center based out of the San Francisco Public Library, said from the hippie movement to the first gay liberation march in 1970, the Bay Area has always held space for resistance and social movement.

"San Francisco has been a beacon for radical politics, for trailblazers, for people trying to live outside the box and make their own way," Mitra said.

Despite the accepting culture of California, Mitra said messaging at the federal level can still cause harm to targeted communities.

With recent headlines including the renaming of a U.S. Navy ship dedicated to gay rights activist Harvey Milk and controversy surrounding a transgender high school track athlete competing at the California state competition, the Bay Area is not exempt from these national trends.

Still, Mitra said the LGBT community has long found strength in solidarity during hardship.

“We knew how to come together to fight the police brutality we were experiencing at Stonewall. We knew how to come together in 1970 for our first Pride March,” Mitra said. “We're not going to get through it without one another.”

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Vasudev only started lifting at Brightside Barbell a mere 10 months ago.

At 50 years old, she has tried a myriad of options and gyms in her search for a fitness community from yoga to dancing to pilates. None of them stuck.

Vasudev said she didn’t fit the traditional archetype for pilates and yoga, often demanding a certain kind of femininity and lacking body diversity. With her large, purple-framed glasses and multiple golden nose piercings, Vasudev doesn’t necessarily fall into the “gym bro” category, either.

So, when she stumbled upon Brightside Barbell due to its proximity to her home, it was kismet.

“Here, I feel like we can be really vulnerable about our struggles, not just physically but also mental health issues,” Vasudev said.

On June 1, Brightside Barbell co-hosted a weightlifting competition dubbed “Barbells Not Bans” to raise money for the Transgender Law Center based in Oakland. A portion of the entry fees, shirt sales, concessions and spectator tickets was later donated, though Brooks said they had not yet calculated the total amount raised.

Community was central to the conception of Brightside Barbell, but Brooks said recent political turmoil has made their mission paramount to the services their gym provides.

Fitness as a space for bonding is not exclusive to Brightside Barbell. Brooks said CrossFit, a branded fitness regime, stresses the idea of “shared suffering” as a bonding experience. And while Brightside Barbell is not a CrossFit gym, Brooks said the idea still resonated.

“You are doing this really hard, uncomfortable thing,” Brooks said. “But then you as a group go through it and then come out the other side.”

Whether that be the physical exertion taking place during a workout or the more ephemeral experience of sharing a targeted identity, Brightside Barbell revels in the idea of seeing people at their worst and forging connection anyways.

“There's a closeness in that,” Brooks said.