

# Tulsa, Oklahoma

**2006 POPULATION (ESTIMATED):** 382,872  
**SAME-SEX COUPLES PER 1,000 HOUSEHOLDS:** 7.74  
**RANK CHANGE FROM 2000 TO 2006:** 77 to 46

It's just plain hard to argue with Rodgers and Hammerstein: Oklahoma's got "plenty of heart and plenty of hope." T-town (as Tulsans call it) is the second largest city in the Sooner State. Still trying to erase its image as a Dust Bowl ghost, the flourishing art deco city now has substantial Mexican, Vietnamese, and Russian middle classes, and several museums and theaters. A shining star is the Philbrook Museum of Art, a 23-acre Renaissance-inspired villa built by oil tycoon Waite Phillips with one of the country's most underrated collections of art.

Though the city is a test market for many chain restaurants and products, it has a burgeoning food scene that owes its flavor to the region's chili, BBQ, and beef heritages as well as an organic, local, and seasonal revival cultivated from the area's renowned farmer's markets.

While the U.S. Census places Tulsa in the South, the city, situated at the foot of the Ozarks, is actually an amalgamation of Midwestern, Southwestern, and Southern cultures, peppered liberally with cowboy, Native American, oil, and Dust Bowl influences that have helped shape its unique Americana flair. After all, this area is the birthplace of Route 66 and the career of Gene Autry, not to mention gay icon Kristen Chenoweth. Gays tend to favor neighborhoods like Brookside, Cherry Street, and the city's self-proclaimed "gayest neighborhood," Brady Heights.

Justice Waidner, 30, the executive director of Oklahomans for Equality, grew up in Tulsa before moving to Amherst, Mass., to attend Hampshire College in 1996. "I spent seven years living in various cities including Boston, Atlanta, and Amsterdam but decided to come home to the town that raised me. It's proven to



be one of the best decisions I ever made," she says via phone on the drive home from a Thai restaurant with her mom, Mary, a local librarian and former PFLAG president, who recently won a "community hero" award from Oklahomans for Equality.

"Tulsa is a welcoming and

open city in the middle of a red state, which certainly adds to the influx of regional people who choose to relocate to our community," says Waidner. "It also offers a relatively low cost of living while maintaining numerous big-city benefits, which is a draw for LGBT people and others who want culture and amenities but at a more affordable price and in a more laid-back atmosphere."

Justice works at the new Dennis R. Neill Equality Center, the second largest LGBT center in the region, smack-dab in the heart of downtown. "The center serves as a home for many programs including support groups, social activities, professional development associations, the LGBT hotline, health testing, the David Bohnett CyberCenter, Nancy and Joe McDonald Rainbow Library, an events center, art gallery, pride store, and wellness program," she continues. "Our very existence and continued growth is an indication of the strong LGBT community in Tulsa. It all makes me very proud to say that I'm a Tulsan!"

It took eight long years of fund-raising and 7,000 hours of painstaking volunteer-led renovations before the center opened in January 2007, underscoring the determined Okie spirit and the state's motto, Labor Conquers All Things. →



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