

At Solidarity Rally, Community Members Vow to Combat Hate, Make Santa Barbara Safer

Event put on by the Pacific Pride Foundation was in response to battery and hate crimes committed against two friends on State Street

[Noozhawk](#)

Richard Schiwietz told a crowd in downtown Santa Barbara's De la Guerra Plaza Tuesday evening that throughout his childhood and early adult life, he had been bullied and harassed "for being different."

Though he told friends, supporters and strangers alike at the [Pacific Pride Foundation](#) rally that he had decided a while ago to no longer remain silent in the face of homophobia, the final straw came two weeks ago when [he and a friend were loudly harassed by a man on State Street](#) — which culminated in Schiwietz being assaulted.

Schiwietz and a close friend, Saul Lerma, were walking arm in arm downtown the evening of Oct. 4 when a man began yelling homophobic names, profanity and threats at them, according to the two men and Santa Barbara police.



The suspect, 54-year-old John Harlan Savala of Santa Barbara, allegedly flipped off the two men, who are gay, and punched Schiwietz in the head, causing him a concussion and a black eye.

The two men followed Savala, who was later charged with battery and hate crimes after being arrested outside of [Cost Plus World Market](#) at 610 State St.

Tuesday's gathering, which drew some 100 community members two weeks to the hour after the incident, was meant not only for solidarity, but to encourage attendees to step in when they see acts of violence, harassment or bullying in their community.

The event was announced on Oct. 11 on [National Coming Out Day](#), after Schiwietz got in touch with the Pacific Pride Foundation.



“He made the decision that he wanted to go a little public with his experience, just because he knows — and we know — that a lot of different people in the LGBTQ community experience harassment and discrimination on State Street,” said Patrick Lyra Kearns, Pacific Pride Foundation’s LGBTQ+ outreach advocate.

The foundation is an advocacy and education group with offices in Santa Barbara and Santa Maria that works to build and make visible LGBT communities, and prevent the transmission of HIV/AIDS along the Central Coast.



State Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson, D-Santa Barbara, spoke during the solidarity rally Tuesday. (Sam Goldman / Noozhawk photo)

With Lerma at his side, Schiwietz explained that random, explicit incidences of homophobia are not unique to him.



“Although we live in this most amazing and beautiful city, there are so many of us – very young people and older alike – who are called ‘different’ and still have to assemble the courage every single day to walk out our doors in Santa Barbara, to walk down our own State Street, and

still have to be afraid of being shouted at or chased or even punched,” he said.

Speaking before Schiwietz was [state Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson](#), D-Santa Barbara, who said that society is “at a very, very difficult crossroads,” both locally and nationally, given the unprecedented hate and fear she said has taken over political dialogue.

“We must make it very clear that under absolutely no circumstances is (hate) acceptable,” she said.

As part of the event, attendees walked together to the corner of State and De la Guerra streets, where Schiwietz was assaulted, to pass out materials to passersby and hold a moment of silence.



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“Let’s make our magnificent city a model for others, where as citizens and businesses alike we embrace all kinds of people from all over the world to feel safe and most welcome here with the knowledge that we look out for each other, and make it safe always for young people, especially for those labeled different, to feel watched over and protected,” Schiwietz said.

“And most of all, make it so that what happened to Saul and I happens less and less because we care about each other, and in so many respects, realize that we are all different,” he said.

Savala’s criminal case will be continued Thursday after Deputy District Attorney Benjamin Ladinig, who is prosecuting the case, motioned to amend the complaint charge from a misdemeanor to a felony.

On Monday, the Santa Barbara Police Department bomb squad [responded to a report of a suspicious package](#) at the Pacific Pride Foundation office on Haley Street. The parcel turned out to be books wrapped in brown paper, but concerns were heightened due to the recent hate crime incident, according to police.

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About 100 people gathered for a solidarity rally to encourage community members to step in when they see acts of violence, harassment or bullying. (Sam Goldman / Noozhawk photo)