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Outstanding Voices: Robbie Silver drags downtown S.F. into the future



Image: San Francisco Business Times

Robbie Silver, executive director, Downtown SF Partnership, is one of the Business Times' 2024 Outstanding Voices honorees.

ADAM PARDEE



By [Alex Barreira](#) – Staff Reporter, San Francisco Business Times
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Editor's note: *As part of our Business of Pride publication every year, the Business Times highlights a dozen or more Outstanding Voices honorees. [Click here](#) to read about our other 2024 honorees.*

Robbie Silver, executive director, Downtown SF Partnership

When you think of the Financial District after 5 p.m., you're not exactly thinking a hot spot for nightlife or for drag, the latter more typically found in SoMa or the Castro. But there's a transition under way downtown, and Robbie Silver is spearheading it.

For the executive director of the Downtown SF Partnership community benefit district, now is the right time to “queer the typical heteronormative spaces of downtown” as an economic strategy. The nonprofit's inaugural chief has worked since 2021 to make the 43 blocks of the Financial District and Jackson Square more visible to San Franciscans as a place to be outside the 9-to-5, with fun and entertainment deep into the night. That comes part and parcel with diversity.

He's informed in part by his identity as a bisexual man, which has meant navigating visibility through a different lens. Over the last year he's come out for the first time to friends, family, and colleagues. In an age where depictions of bisexual men are virtually absent from mainstream culture – and stereotypes persist, even in San Francisco – Silver is wearing the identity with pride after years of internal ambivalence and outward silence.

The Downtown SF Partnership funds regular cleaning services for local businesses and improvement projects that weave together public art and history. It organizes events like the “Let's Glow” holiday light show that brought thousands of people downtown.

Another event series, “Drag Me Downtown” – where local drag performers do pop-up shows at downtown venues each week in June – was the site for a spontaneous, revelatory moment for Silver last year. On stage, no less.

“I felt I had some strength in me to grab the mic and come out to an audience of random people,” Silver recalled. “It really wasn’t until my own staff actually encouraged me to tell more of my story.”

Has being bisexual influenced your work for Downtown SF Partnership?

Well, postpandemic, we want downtown to feel more inclusive. We want businesses that didn’t have an opportunity downtown before to have that. So it’s not all-encompassing, but really I just see with this reset a lot of potential, especially in our nightlife economy, that downtown can grow into.

What’s the response been to the “Drag Me Downtown” series?

You never know what the reaction’s going to be, but it’s been amazing. There’s lines out the door, people giving out feather boas and tips. What surprised me was the audience was really all ages. European tourists who just googled “drag performance” that day, younger techie people. Someone even came for their retirement party.

So, growing up, was it acceptable to be bisexual?

In Riverside? It was not. Really the only place I could feel myself was at this gay bar called the Menagerie, that a friend of mine owned and he became a kind of a mentor to me. But then another of my other friends who I was nervous about coming out to, he just fully embraced me. I felt bad for doubting him.

How did you make sense of your feelings? Did you think you were straight?

I had a lot of crushes. On the female side, I could do an episode of Tinder nightmares – I’ve seen it all. I would silently crush afar from the male side, but didn’t go on a first date with a guy until San Francisco.

Sounds confusing.

I fought it for a very long time. I didn't think anybody would accept me. There were negative influences that made me think "I'm just gay," or "It's just a phase" or "You're just fooling around."

When did that change?

I didn't really accept myself as bisexual until about 2020.

And you weren't public about it until more recently?

Right. I would joke around with my colleague about, what do bedroom preferences have to do with my work? But she, who's lesbian, convinced me to participate in this Pride issue. She said my identity is a lived experience that no one else has and that gave me a lot of strength.

What have the reactions been like?

There's been three kinds of responses. There's been, "We could tell"; there's been, "Oh, OK!" and the conversation moves on. And there's been, "Oh, me too!"

That last one seems pretty important.

I'd love to find more people like me who want to network, want to feel like part of a broader community. I assume they're out there.

But I mean, we're sorta invisible. When someone asks you if you're married or with kids, and I mention I have a girlfriend, the assumption is that I'm straight. And "partner" is ambiguous. So I usually try to be cheeky like "I'm a half gay" or just say "I'm the B in LGBT."

I pretty much never see depictions of bisexual men in popular media, right?

Right, and the thought is that anyone who's bi is going to cheat on everybody. Or you're stuck between tribes: Am I straight enough? Gay enough? No, I'm just normal being bisexual. But it's difficult to let people know who you are. If someone puts "bisexual" on their dating app profile it's like, good luck getting matches.

You want to help downtown San Francisco be the next version of its best self. But what made you want to be here in the first place?

I first visited around 2014 on a road trip with my cousin, just after I got my license. Imagine trying to park a truck here! But walking around, you see how open people are about who they are. I didn't even totally understand then, what is this I'm feeling? And so San Francisco's always had some of that – this haven of curiosities, of possibilities.

About Silver

- **Age:** 32
- **Born:** Orange, Calif., but grew up in Riverside
- **Residence:** Vallejo
- **Education:** Bachelor's, California Baptist University
- **Resume:** Union Square BID, City of Riverside, the Arc of Riverside County, Riverside Downtown Partnership
- **Family:** Mom Debbie; Toby, a Weimaraner; Penny, a Chihuahua
- **The movie, show, artist or album you return to over and over:** “‘Clue!’ – yes, from the '80s; Chris Daughtry's music has gotten me through a lot; and I can watch 'Frasier' any night of the week.”