

Proud Hamilton Gays Prefer A Low Profile Event

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Men flashing bare buttocks and women with breasts exposed will parade before hundreds of thousands of supporters -- and gawkers -- this weekend as Toronto celebrates its annual toast to the homosexual community.

A corresponding event held in Hamilton last Sunday was a more modest affair.

A couple of hundred gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals attended a picnic in the backyard of the Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre.

While the Toronto festivities will take place over a week, Hamilton Pride began and ended in a single afternoon.

But organizers say they appreciate its subdued nature.

They like the fact it is family oriented and argue that the lewd images broadcast annually out of Toronto foster negative images of homosexuals.

The Hamilton picnic is "like a big old family reunion. That's all we're aiming for. There was no nudity whatsoever and that's the way we want it," Kevin Brittain said yesterday.

In Toronto, the television cameras "pick out the most outlandish outfits and the most bizarre events and that's all you see. You don't see the two dads walking down the street with the babies. You see the two guys walking in their jock straps or the women with bare breasts.

"... As long as I'm part of the (Hamilton Pride) committee, that's not what I want to bring about." Some members of Toronto's gay community are also embarrassed by the gaudy show of flesh and say the spectacle hampers efforts of gays and lesbians to win both broad acceptance and equality with the heterosexual majority.

Derek Norman, co-manager of the Glad Day Book Shop, a Yonge Street store catering to gays and lesbians, believes "in your face" demonstrations have helped the quest for rights. But he said the focus of Toronto's gay pride event has been lost.

"Historically, the gay pride march ... started as a political march on Queen's Park and city hall. It has become a big corporate-sponsored street party that is an excuse for everybody to take lots of drugs and have the time of their life."

He said as the gay community has gained more acceptance, it has become less politically aware.

"They think that they've won the battle. But when they are still arresting men in parks for sexual activity and denying equal benefits anywhere, obviously there is a long way to go."

Lyla Miklos, who helped organize the Hamilton event, agrees there are unhappy aspects of the Toronto parade.

"When you wiggle your butt in the air or expose your breasts or whatever ... it does reflect negatively. People think (homosexuals) are just a bunch of people out having sex 24 hours a day."

But what it means to be "queer" has many different layers, Miklos said.

To some people it means "an openness with your sexuality that maybe you couldn't have dealt with if you didn't come out," she said. "It means not being afraid of your body, not being afraid of sexuality in whatever form, and I think that's what all the flesh is about."

The fact the Hamilton event is comparatively quiet is largely a reflection of the smaller community's less tolerant attitude towards gays and lesbians, she said.

"I went to the flag raising for Toronto Pride yesterday and it hit me like a ton of bricks that everyone from the media was there. You couldn't even see Mayor Mel Lastman (who will ride in Sunday's parade). You could just see the press."

Mayor Bob Morrow, who refused to proclaim Gay Pride Day in the city until he was forced to do so in 1995 by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, had other engagements at the time of the Hamilton picnic.

He left the task of political representation to Terry Cooke, the regional chairman.

"In Toronto, because it's such an urban centre, a metropolis, there's security," Miklos said. "Even an hour away, it's a different mindset."

She said many Hamilton homosexuals are quite blatant about their sexuality during trips to Toronto, but won't acknowledge it in their home city.

Photographers at the Hamilton Pride picnic were warned not to take pictures without permission. Reporters were asked not to quote picnic goers without warning them their words could appear in the newspaper.

In some ways, Miklos said, it's like saying, "'Well, we're out but we're not THAT proud' or 'We're queer, we're here but our phone number's unlisted.'"

She added, however, that some of that hesitancy is understandable.

It is unlikely many people who attended the event outside Toronto city hall worried that someone would follow them home and assault them, Miklos said.

"Whereas, in Hamilton, that's an honest to goodness fear.

"There's people who could lose their jobs, get kicked out of their apartments, be disowned by their families."