

Gay Pride and Prejudice; High spirits of rally can't cloak unease
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After spending 15 years in Toronto, Randy Mattinson says he doesn't always feel at ease living as a gay man in Hamilton.

Toronto has the largest gay community in Canada. It has a gay village that spans for blocks from its heart at Church and Wellesley streets.

Hamilton, on the other hand, didn't officially proclaim a gay pride day until 1995. Its gay community is just starting to assert a stronger presence.

"There seems to be a certain stigma attached here," Mattinson said Saturday, as he marched with about 300 others to Dundurn Park from a rally at Hamilton City Hall.

"I feel 100 per cent more at ease in Toronto."

Organizers of Hamilton Pride festivities, which ended yesterday, hope the community's first rally and march will help gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people take a significant step forward.

"We usually keep our events low key because there is a fear in the community about being out," said Lyla Miklos, who is part of the committee that organized Hamilton Pride 2000.

"We now want to make our presence felt."

This was the first year Pride events spanned longer than a day. Organizers only started telling the media about Pride, which started in 1996 with a small, quiet picnic, last year.

Part of the reason for the discretion was the effort it took to get the city to proclaim a gay pride day.

In 1991, Mayor Bob Morrow refused to officially proclaim such a day. Four years later, the Ontario Human Rights Commission ruled Morrow had discriminated against gays and lesbians, and he was forced to make a proclamation.

"In 1991, the concept of holding a march was not feasible," said Nick Mul of the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Ontario. "This first march signifies the progress we have made in this community."

Mul was one of several speakers at the rally, which heard from politicians, including Ron Corsini, David Agostino and Andrea Horwath, speaking on behalf of the mayor.

Morrow was invited to address the rally, but was unable to attend because he had other commitments. And although he participated yesterday in a service at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Hamilton -- part of Hamilton Pride festivities -- his absence at the rally did not sit well with some.

"Here we are in 2000 and you'd think he'd (Morrow) finally come out to an event like this," Mul said.

The crowd was told at the rally that Morrow would attend a Pride brunch yesterday at the Bombay Club, a gay bar on Hughson Street North. About 20 minutes after the brunch started, two patrons laughed and rolled their eyes when asked whether they expected the mayor would show up.

Morrow said he had other events to attend after the Unitarian service and told the committee beforehand that he wouldn't be able to make the brunch.

As for next year's Pride festivities, committee member Miklos said it was too early to say whether the event will grow again.

Some members of the community said they would like to see the city play host to a gay pride parade, like the one in Toronto.

Mattinson, however, thinks a march suits Hamilton better.

"I kind of like the idea of a march," he said.

"It's something that's long overdue. We just need more involvement from the community and corporations."