

**Gay community takes pride in calling Hamilton home**  
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They're queer. They're here. And they love calling Hamilton home.

Surprised? You shouldn't be.

Gays and lesbians in Hamilton say this is one of the best Ontario communities in which to live.

It's tolerant. Safe. Interesting. Welcoming. Even thriving.

In some innovative ways Hamilton -- once known for having a mayor who refused to officially proclaim Gay Pride Week -- has even become a provincial leader on gay issues.

The city still isn't a gay utopia, of course. Like any other place, it has gay-bashing incidents and homophobic letters to the editor. But members of the gay community are quick to jump to Hamilton's defence.

"Hamilton has that reputation as a blue collar town that people associate with bigotry or ignorance," says Bernie Marcoux, owner of Gomorrah's Bookstore on Locke Street South. "I don't think that stereotype applies whatsoever ... Hamilton is a very tolerant, diverse city and I think people here are aware there are sexually diverse groups here."

Gomorrah's is one of only four gay and lesbian bookstores in the province. There are two others in Toronto and one in Ottawa.

The existence and success of such a specialized store in Hamilton speaks to the size, affluence and influence of the city's gay community.

Marcoux quietly opened the business nearly five years ago on James Street South in "a little basement shop tucked away, hard to find. And I chose that deliberately."

Nearby merchants gave Marcoux a cool reception, but soon the bustling little bookstore was one of the busiest businesses on the block. It quickly doubled as an informal meeting place for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people and the notice board became the premier place to advertise everything from dyke dances to queer dinner parties.

(By the way, queer is a word reclaimed by the gay and lesbian community after its long use as a pejorative term.)

Two months ago, Gomorrah's moved into a bigger space on Locke Street and put out "a big, blazing sign."

The day he opened, neighbouring shop and restaurant owners came over to welcome Marcoux to the neighbourhood. Some have put rainbow stickers in their windows to show they support the gay community.

The trendy little neighbourhood is considered the second most gay- positive area of the city, next to Westdale.

"Locke Street is the perfect place for gays," says Marcoux. "They love the antique stores and the higher end shopping."

Gay and lesbian business owners are themselves a strong force in Hamilton. Nearly three years ago, Marcoux started the Greater Hamilton Gay and Lesbian Business Association. Its 21 members have been drawn together by their interest in marketing to the queer community.

Lyla Miklos, who works in downtown Toronto but has chosen to live in Hamilton, brags about how much queer stuff there is to do here.

"Hamilton is a pretty vibrant community from a gay and lesbian perspective," the 26-year-old says.

There are four gay bars, including one leather bar and one drag club. There's a gay radio show on the McMaster University radio station and another one at Mohawk. Hamilton Pride Week (already under way) draws hundreds of people to dozens of celebrations.

Another jewel in Hamilton's gay pride crown is McMaster University and the incredible level of acceptance for gays and lesbians not only on campus, but in the Westdale neighbourhoods surrounding it.

Three years ago, McMaster became the first university in Ontario to fully sponsor a Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgendered Centre. While most universities have gay and lesbian clubs that are run as extracurricular, volunteer-based organizations, Mac's centre is funded by the McMaster Students Union.

GLBT Centre co-ordinator Joe Kenney says that at student leadership conferences across Ontario and the United States, McMaster has become a role model for other universities where gay issues are concerned.

Kenney himself attended the University of Toronto before coming to Mac and says the queer community here is a much more "cohesive" group than the sprawling community in Toronto.

Hamilton also leads the pack in the way its police service has educated itself about the gay community. It's something both the police and the gay community boast about.

The police started the Hamilton Police Task Force on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered in 1996 in an effort to open better lines of communication between the police and the community. Since then

other police services -- including the Toronto Police -- have studied Hamilton's model as they work to set up similar task forces.

So, Hamilton's gay community has a lot to be proud of as they hoist the rainbow flag in front of City Hall tomorrow in official (yes, official) recognition of Pride Week.

But the rest of the city should also take pride in the fact that Steeltown has a sterling reputation.