

Be proud of diversity: Mayor

Community leaders say clear message opposing gay-bashing is necessary

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Hamilton's community leaders need to immediately send the message that any form of gay-bashing is not acceptable in this city.

That was the No. 1 priority stated at an "emergency meeting" of the Strengthening Hamilton's Community Initiative (SHCI) roundtable, which includes a cross-section of the city's faith, cultural, political and educational leaders. They gather regularly to discuss strategies to combat racism and discrimination.

"There needs to be an immediate response by the leadership of this community that says an attack against one of us is an attack against all of us," summarized Mayor Larry Di Ianni, who led the public forum Saturday at City Hall, attended by about 40 people.

"One that says Hamilton needs to be proud and welcoming of its diversity. One that sees strength in being different, not weakness in being different."

One suggestion was that Di Ianni write an article or letter to appear in the newspaper. A second suggestion encouraged cultural leaders to open discussion in their own communities.

The meeting was prompted by the recent violent attack on restaurant owner Ronn Mattai at a downtown bar.

The owner of the popular Junction Cafe was attacked at the Absinthe bar on King Street East by a man who slashed his face with a beer glass. Mattai needed about 200 stitches.

Michael Cordeiro, 19, has been charged with aggravated assault and remains in police custody. He will appear in court today to set a date for the bail hearing.

Hamilton Police Chief Brian Mullan, a member of the roundtable, said bail will be opposed. He confirmed that investigators are pursuing the case as a hate crime based on "clear and convincing evidence."

Kevin Brittain, a friend of Mattai, told the roundtable that the stitches were removed on Friday and that, while it will take some time for Mattai to heal emotionally, "not one ounce of energy has gone to revenge or bitterness."

Meanwhile, about 35 members of the First Unitarian Church on Dundurn Street South marched downtown yesterday to protest all hate crimes.

They met up with a group from Centenary United Church on Main Street West and continued on to Mattai's restaurant for lunch.

The walk was organized by the Unitarian Church's Interweave committee which includes gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender members of the congregation and their supporters.

"When I found out what had happened, I felt very strongly that people of all faiths, everyone in Hamilton, should respond," said Rev. Allison Barrett, minister at the church. "It's simply a matter of human compassion."

Those at the SHCI meeting included leaders of the Hindu, Arab, Muslim and Jewish communities.

Rabbi Morton Green of Adas Israel Synagogue walked from Westdale on the Jewish Sabbath to attend the meeting.

"I think it is important for the entire community of Hamilton to recognize that there are differences that must be respected. Violence and gay-bashing is abhorrent," he said.

"When one resorts to that sort of reaction, when one has a disagreement with another . . . that represents a breakdown of society."

Other recommendations, over the longer term, included creating an anti-hate policy for the City of Hamilton, improving education in the schools on homosexuality and getting the business community involved.

Amanda Sutherland, 21, attended the meeting because she felt compelled by the stories appearing in the media.

Sutherland, who grew up in Halifax but moved to Hamilton about a year ago, told the committee that she has borne the brunt of jokes and been beaten up for much of her life -- with school and police officials often dismissing complaints -- because she is a lesbian.

"It doesn't matter where you are, you're always targeted and it sucks," she said.

Lyla Miklos, an SHCI member and representative of the city's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Committee, said the meeting was a good first step.

"I don't know what I was hoping for," she said.

"If nothing else, the fact that we have a cross-section of the community . . . all coming to the table and (unanimously) saying this is not acceptable and there's consensus that some statement will be made, that's so heartwarming to someone who is in the queer community."