

Hamilton Rallies Around Victim

By Tanya Gulliver

Xtra!

March 18, 2004

While leaders in Hamilton try to move beyond a gaybashing last month to address systematic hate and discrimination issues, a new debate has emerged about the rights of the victim versus the greater good of society.

Ronn Mattai, owner of The Junction Café in Hamilton, was attacked on Feb 21 in a downtown bar in what police are describing as a hate-motivate crime. The wider community reacted quickly with outrage including a public statement from Hamilton Mayor Larry Di Ianni.

“The bonds of community harmony have been shaken by ignorance of and hostility toward a segment of our community that makes up Hamilton’s rich mosaic – the GLBT [gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans] community,” Di Ianni wrote in The Hamilton Spectator.

Di Ianni’s statement was endorsed by more than 20 organizations including the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce, the Hamilton Police Service, the Hamilton Police Service, the Hamilton Muslim Association, the Hamilton Jewish Federation and the Hamilton and District Labour Council.

Lyla Miklos, interim chair of Hamilton’s GLBT Advisory Committee, also wrote a lengthy article for the Spectator that appeared opposite the mayor’s column.

Yet neither Miklos nor Di Ianni refer to Mattai specifically. Both decided to honour a request he made through a media release and friends for the focus to be removed from him so that he can heal both physically and emotionally.

Friends say Mattai is weary of the attention and is antsy about becoming the gay poster boy for violence. In many cases of assault, the victim isn’t named, yet in this instance, not only was Mattai named by the police, but he was also outed in the media.

His photo appeared in the last issue of XTRA, something friends say displeased him. He is currently refusing all requests for interviews, including XTRA’s.

Activists are trying to balance Mattai’s wishes with efforts to prevent this kind of attack and deal with issues of hate in Hamilton. For example, The Friends of Ronn Committee, established in the wake of the attack, is planning an event for Sept 11. They will be involving Mattai in their decision making process to ensure that the event doesn’t cause further violation of his privacy.

At the same time, Arco-Iris, the Portuguese-speaking queer group, held a news conference on Mar 14 to announce their support for Mattai, and to speak out against perceived Portuguese-bashing by the mainstream community and homophobia within the Portuguese community. (Michael Codeiro, 19, who

was arrested in the wake of the incident and, at press time was awaiting charges, is believed to be Portuguese.)

“We want the Portuguese Canadian community to understand that we’re not here to point fingers,” said Acro-Iris president Jorge da Costa at a multilingual press conference. “But we do want our community to understand the seriousness of the issue, to learn from it so that something like this will never happen again.”

The news conference repeatedly suggested there were negative statements made in the mainstream community against the accused based on his ethnicity, and comments against the queer community made by those in the Portuguese community, but da Costa was unable to provide any concrete examples from either side.