

Organizers Add Sober Note to Gay Pride Fest

By Sharon Boase

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Organizers of this year's Hamilton Pride Festival are promising the usual sequin-studded fun and foolery -- but with an underpinning of seriousness.

The past year has been a time of great highs and profound lows for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. Ontario's Appeal Court ruled same-sex couples have the right to marry, while Canada's hate-crime protections were extended to gays and lesbians.

Yet the entire community -- gay and straight -- reacted with horror to the brutal attack on Hamilton restaurateur Ronn Mattai. Police have treated his face slashing as a suspected incident of gay bashing.

"Hamilton Pride has always been frothy, silly fun," says festival vice-chair Lyla Miklos.

"But because of what happened to Ronn Mattai, it's kind of brought back into focus why we have this event. It's because we're an oppressed minority. Many of our rights are denied and there's a lot of oppression that you face daily because of your sexual orientation."

So along with the Wizard of Oz Sing-Along (which kicks off Pride Week tomorrow afternoon) and the annual Pride Drag Show (tomorrow evening), there's a Queer Issues Symposium Wednesday evening. A panel will discuss sexual health, election issues and hate crimes.

The attack shone a harsh light on the need for education.

"The only way it will change is if our generation teaches the next generation to love and not to hate, to accept -- not merely tolerate -- but accept," says Miklos.

Damien Dommer, owner of The Werx alternative lifestyles club, considers the Hamilton Pride Festival "the proudest of gay high holidays" and this year is no different.

"Overall, the gay community has enjoyed a very good year -- with the exception of Ronn's attack," Dommer says. "We have a number of gay and lesbian businesses, some right downtown, and I haven't heard of any violent crimes around them. But if push comes to shove, we're a united community that will stand against violence."

Some 3,000 people are expected to take in the seven-day festival which gets an official and visible boost Monday morning with a flag-raising at City Hall. A gala reception Thursday night at the Sheraton Hotel will name a Pride citizen, group and business of the year.

A women's dance will be held at First Unitarian Church next Friday, while The Laramie Project, an unflinching examination of a murderous hate crime, will be staged at The Players Guild Studio Theatre both Friday and Saturday nights.

The now-annual Hamilton Pride Parade starts with an 11:30 a.m. rally Saturday at City Hall followed by a noon-hour parade start. The parade will set out on Main Street, take MacNab Street to King Street West, then north on Bay Street to the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre.

Stuart Street will be blocked off between Bay and MacNab for vendors, information tables, live entertainment, a barbecue and a beer tent.

Centenary United Church will host the closing Pride Festival event on Sunday, June 20. Sing with Pride will feature Forte! and the Centenary United Church choir.

Centenary has married 16 same-sex couples since the law changed on June 10, 2003. Reverend Wayne Irwin says one of the couples he has married at Centenary has been together for 40 years. The church is now planning social gatherings that would offer gays and lesbians an option to bars.