

Hamilton's gay community shows its pride

By Peter Van Harten

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Sequins, feathers, drag queens, pom-pom waving and flag-twirling marchers and the beat of high decibel, amplified music.

To the theme of Your True Colours Are Beautiful, the city's gay lesbian bisexual transgender community (GLBT) treated Hamilton to its fifth annual Pride Parade on the weekend.

"Every year, our celebration grows and grows," said organizer Lyla Miklos.

"We are proud of who we are and want to let people know we are here and a dynamic part of Hamilton."

In its most ambitious Pride Festival effort yet, the community staged performance art set pieces in Hamilton and marched through the city core and down Bay Street for a barbecue and trade show at the Workers Arts and Heritage Museum on Stuart Street.

Several hundred people gathered for a City Hall rally before setting out carrying a gigantic version of the rainbow striped Pride flag which flew this past week at City Hall.

Miklos said the climate of fear has eased since the years when the city refused to fly the rainbow flag and proclaim Pride Day.

"That fear is still valid but we are not going to let ourselves be frightened," she said.

The community continues to face threats.

Hamilton businessman and restaurant owner Ronn Mattai was attacked in what was feared to be a hate crime. A man has been charged in that assault.

Court protected, same sex marriages are a hot election issue.

At the City Hall rally, Mayor Larry Di Ianni called the attack on Mattai a "stain" on the city's community values that sent "shock waves" through Hamilton.

The greatest good that came from the "evil" and "senseless" attack was the outpouring of support throughout the city to prevent such acts from happening again and to foster harmony and respect for diversity, he said.

Hamilton police Chief Brian Mullan, MP Stan Keyes and MPPs Judy Marsales and Andrea Horwath were also invited speakers at the rally.

Keyes said the oppression of the GLBT communities in Canada was "shameful" and "unacceptable."

"Tolerance is not good enough. We must learn to be accepting," he said.

Activist Tanya Gulliver urged the crowd to vote strategically against Stephen Harper and Conservative candidates.

The election is a fearful threat because she believes, "Mr. Harper and his team will strip our community of rights and freedoms one by one."

She said a Conservative government would roll back pension rights and same sex marriage protection.

She also predicted Canada would likely end up with an American-style Supreme Court of social conservatives because of court vacancies to be filled by the next government.

Miklos said politicians may only be looking for votes, but they are acknowledging the vibrant activity that the community brings to Hamilton.

The trade show on Stuart Street, which was blocked to traffic for Saturday's concerts and barbecue, highlighted the number of GLBT-owned or friendly businesses operating in Hamilton.