

Pride and prayer share the stage

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The Hamilton Spectator

June 20, 2005

What are the odds? A booking blunder at City Hall scheduled Hamilton's gay pride rally Saturday for the same time and place as an Evangelical Christian prayer rally. But rather than clash over the conflict, the two groups decided to co-operate. The Pride group changed its start time and the Christian group moved to share its sound system.

"When (Hamilton Pride chair) Lyla (Miklos) first told me about the double booking, I just thought, 'Oh, no, what are we going to do?'" said Deirdre Pike, chair of Hamilton's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered (GLBT) advisory committee.

"I must admit, I didn't have faith in working it out initially," said Pike, an active Roman Catholic.

"It shows the loving and forgiving hearts on both sides, clearly, that we could work together like this."

Evangelical Christians cite Bible passages in their condemnation of homosexuality. They have long been vocal opponents of gay rights, leading other faith groups to aggressively oppose same-sex marriage.

Hundreds of revellers gathered at City Hall for a pep rally before the fifth annual Hamilton Pride parade through downtown. Some 400 gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people, plus friends, families and supporters, cheered, sang and waved rainbow flags.

As Hamilton Pride leaders rallied the troops with speeches before the annual Pride Parade, Evangelical Christians preparing for the Steel City Prayer Rally stood off to the side.

Drag queens sported full-length gowns, complete with high heels and bejewelled tiaras. One young man sported a rainbow-hued woman's bikini. Miklos belted out the national anthem, adding the line, "...True patriot love, in all thy queers command."

Diane Elms, an organizer of Saturday's Christian rally, said she prayed on it when she first learned six weeks ago of the booking mixup. Elms, who leads a weekly prayer service at City Hall for the economic and spiritual well-being of the city, said she concluded it was an opportunity for healing.

"I'm going to pray for forgiveness for what Christians have said, done and felt in the past because Jesus loves them (gays and lesbians)," Elms said. "They were gracious enough to switch their time to 11 from noon and we're just working it all out -- and that's the way it should be."

Hamilton's Sue Shaughnessy said she found the spirit of co-operation wonderful, but puzzling.

"Evangelicals hate the gay lifestyle," added her husband Terry.

"If their motives are pure and positive, why not?" concluded Shaughnessy. "But I refuse to believe people should be condemned for their differences," she said.

Standing off from the gathering, prayer-rally participant Klaas Detmar confided he was somewhat uncomfortable with Saturday's spirit of co-operation.

"We are to help one another out but this is a wrong cause," said Detmar. "They are desecrating marriage, they are desecrating what God created man and woman for. It (same-sex marriage) is not about life but about death.

"But we won't say we'll have nothing to do with them, they are part of our community," he added. "Even though they are damaging their souls."

In her Pride day speech, Miklos thanked prayer-rally organizers for their "graciousness" in working through the conflict. "Your attitude has been so positive. You've demonstrated that a faith community does not mean a hate community."