

Hamilton Pride turns sour

By Tanya Gulliver

Xtra!

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What type of pride is more important: pride for a country's sports victory or pride for a queer community?

Hamilton's Pride parade on Jun 17 resulted in a showdown between two groups, each trying to celebrate in its own way. One group, unfortunately, turned ugly.

As an observer stuck in the middle of clashing factions I was both frightened, and disappointed that however far we seem to come in accepting diverse cultures there is still much work left to do.

That morning Portugal beat Iran, 2-0, in a World Cup soccer match. Hundreds of fans, waving Portuguese flags, poured onto James St in downtown Hamilton to celebrate the victory of their country of origin.

At the same time, hundreds of queers gathered in front of Hamilton City Hall to celebrate Hamilton's 10th annual Pride celebration. The final speaker was MP David Christopherson who, referencing the recent arrests of 17 young Muslim men, roused the crowd with a stirring speech about the importance of celebrating multiculturalism and diversity.

Hamilton's Pride parade is very small town. Unlike Toronto, most of the several hundred people who show up walk or ride in the parade itself.

After watching the beginning, I hopped in my car to meet the parade on James St, where last year business people had come out of their stores to cheer on the parade. Instead I discovered it was already full of soccer celebrants, mostly young men under 30.

I was the only visibly queer person on James, standing alone in the middle of the street waving my wee rainbow flag. As the Pride parade approached an old man on a bench near me said, "I think they're booing."

What I had mistaken for a cheer was actually a jeer. Float after float, marcher after marcher were yelled at, taunted and in a few cases physically shoved.

Joe Whelan, Pride's rally and parade coordinator, was mocked by a child who yelled, "Yeah... I can see you like it up the ass!"

Midway through the parade, the AIDS Network float stopped outside Christ Church Cathedral. The church rang its bells 20 times to honour 20 years of service to Hamilton's community by the AIDS Network.

It was at this point, says Lyla Miklos, Hamilton Pride's media coordinator, "an angry mob of roughly over 50 Portuguese men all wearing team Portugal jerseys gathered together to harass, insult, jeer, physically assault and spew hate at the parade participants. Surprisingly, the men in the mob were young men, between 10 to 30 years of age. Their display of hate was disappointingly not being quelled by elders in their community but encouraged."

I stood cheering and waving my flag as the marchers passed through the largest mass of Portuguese soccer fans. The look in the marchers' eyes was one of hurt, sadness and disgust.

I wanted to leave. I was afraid of what this unruly mob would do next. Despite a very strong police presence -- those with the parade and those already out on James St -- I could see it had the potential to get nasty. But with a few exceptions it stayed nonviolent.

At the same time, I felt that I needed to stand up for my community. I needed to encourage my fellow queers who were passing through this mob of hate. So I stayed and cheered.

But the Pride festival later didn't feel like as much of a celebration as it would have otherwise. The incident proved that we have so far to go to gain full acceptance.