

Yes, Virginia, There is a Pride

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Last weekend I had the privilege of helping organize and then attend Hamilton Pride celebrations. Hamilton has a rather fragmented queer community. There are these little pockets of people who all go off and do their own thing, but trying to get everyone to come together for a common goal was quite a challenge. Seeing everyone: the bears, the queens, the leather guys, the dykes, the families and the clubbers all come together and have a good time gave me a nice warm feeling inside. Still, Hamilton can be a funny community. I guess our motto is: "We're here! We're queer! But our phone number is unlisted!"

Many of the members of the Hamilton queer community actively shunned the local media from Hamilton Pride. For years we would not even make them aware of the event because of the fear of bashing and harassment on both a subtle and overt level. So after a weekend of being a media cop ("Don't take a picture without asking! Before you ask for quotes, be sure to clearly state who you are! If you want a crowd shot, we will have to set it up for you . . . etc.) it was a shock to my system to see the mob of media types at Nathan Phillips Square at lunchtime on Monday, without one person hiding from a camera lens.

Toronto Mega City Mayor Mel Lastman kicked off Toronto's Pride Week Celebrations with an official proclamation and a raising of a Pride flag. Incidentally, not only will the flag be raised at Nathan Phillips but at all the former municipalities surrounding the greater Toronto area's City Hall as well. When I say media mob, I mean it. All of us queers were politely sitting in chairs trying to watch Mayor Mel and Co. and most of what we saw was the backsides of reporters. So much for the media being there to observe.

Still it was a “make your heart glow” moment. George Smitherman gave a few words; Ontario’s first openly gay MPP. Kyle Ray who is an alderman and out and proud was the MC for the event. The Toronto Pride Co-Chairs spoke and two gay choirs, “Singing Out” and “Forte” sang. There was so much positive energy – it was great, it was safe, deceptively safe. Being and working in Toronto, I can take it for granted sometimes that there many parts of Canada where what I just saw would only take place in some science fiction or fantasy novel. In fact only an hour’s drive away the events at Nathan Phillips Square would only happen in a drug induced dream. It is sad, but it is true.

It seems like we’ve come a long way when we walk down Church Street, but if we step out of the urban metropolis of Toronto things are quite different. Imagine being queer on the east coast in some fishing village or maybe in the middle of the prairies in a farming community. Suddenly, things don’t seem so progressive anymore. Never mind the locale, even your skin colour or ethnic background can be a barrier against coming out. When I looked over the faces in the audience at Nathan Phillips Square, the majority of them were white and male. The more things change, the more they stay the same eh?

Mayor Mel mentioned all the positive things about Pride: It’s going to be BIG, very BIG, the BIGGEST parade yet (70 floats!), and last year Toronto made forty million dollars off the event. It is always nice to see socially progressive movements turn into cash grabs. Big sigh.

But there is still so much more that needs to change. There are still so many rights that are denied to us and so many of us that don’t feel safe in being open about our sexuality. When all the fear truly goes away then we will all have something to celebrate.