

**PRIDE AND HATE IN HAMILTON**  
*By Lyla Miklos*  
**The Anvil (June 2018, Vol 3, No 2)**



My name is Lyla Miklos. I have been a queer activist in the City of Hamilton for over 20 years. My activism started at Mohawk College. I was one of several LGBTQI2SA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, two spirit, asexual and other sexual orientations and gender identities also included in our rainbow community) students who formed the college's very first official queer student club, Mohawk Pride, in the late 1990's. Although we ran into homophobic barriers along the way each hurdle ultimately turned into a "teachable moment" that led to a deeper understanding between parties and true tangible steps forward towards acceptance.

A revitalized Hamilton Pride Committee asked me to join their team after hearing about my leadership work with Mohawk Pride. I remember those initial meetings being filled with a lot of fear. Former Mayor Bob Morrow's refusal in 1991 to make an official City Hall proclamation in celebration of Hamilton Pride was still a raw wound for the queer community. His refusal led to an Ontario Human Rights complaint which he lost.

There was a definite divide in the Hamilton Pride Committee. The men wanted to have a visible event open to the public. A big party that involved alcohol and live music. The women wanted a private low key family picnic. Only the queer community were to be invited and the general public were not to be informed. This conflict would become so entrenched that first year I was involved I would end up stepping down from the committee. Being a "baby queer activist" I didn't know the history behind this divide nor did I have the language at the time to identify the dynamics that were unfolding as this central conflict tore apart the group. Those with more power and privilege didn't fear visibility. Those who were more vulnerable did. At the time I didn't understand how we could call our event Pride if we were only going to celebrate in secret.

From 1998 to 2007 I would sit on the organizing committee of Hamilton Pride. During that time our event grew from a Sunday afternoon Tea Party in the backyard of the Workers' Arts & Heritage Museum to a full week of events that included a Rainbow Flag Raising Ceremony at City Hall, Rally, March, Mr.

& Miss Hamilton Pride Drag Contest, Pride Awards, Women's Dance, Panel Discussions, BBQ, Live Music Festival, Vendors Market, Father's Day Brunch at Whitehern, Worship Services and more. At the height of my time working on Hamilton Pride we had hundreds of local businesses, community groups, and major corporations contributing funds and gifts in kind to our event. Every level of government would participate, march with us and even speak at our rallies and awards ceremonies. I even remember then Mayor Bob Morrow coming to a Pride Worship Service at my Unitarian Church one year to show his support.

Our queer community was growing, being recognized and being accepted as an essential part of what made Hamilton a welcoming place to live, work and play. Hamilton Pride was not the only LGBTQI2SA+ organization I volunteered my time with. I sat on the GLBT Advisory Committee for the City of Hamilton. A committee that Mayor Bob Wade created to help repair the damaged relationship between the city and Hamilton's LGBTQI2SA+ communities by his predecessor Mayor Bob Morrow. I sat on the GLBT Advisory Committee for the Hamilton Police Service. A committee that was initially formed after Hamilton Police targeted locations in Hamilton that were well known cruising spots for men who have sex with men. I sat on the Community Roundtable of Strengthening Hamilton's Community Initiative (SHCI) as a queer community representative. SHCI was formed in 2001 in response to the firebombing of Hamilton's Hindu Temple with a commitment to end hate in Hamilton.

Did relations with every stakeholder always go well? No we still had to speak up and advocate for ourselves as those in power made mistakes. The raid on a men's bathhouse by The Hamilton Police in 2004 had the queer community showing up en mass at Central Station and City Hall to call out the Police on their duplicity and continued targeting of our spaces.

The City of Hamilton consistently double-booked our Hamilton Pride event spaces. One year I had to speak with the organizers of a Christian Prayer Breakfast that was double booked for the exact same date, time and location as our Hamilton Pride Rally and negotiate a compromise on our start times because city staff made an error yet again. I remember one pointed meeting I had with Mayor Larry Dilanni and his special events staff where I had to "speak firmly" about how the double booking of our event spaces several years in the row sends the signal that either someone with the City is proactively trying to sabotage our event or his staff is grossly incompetent. Let's just say the problem got resolved very quickly that year.

When our queer community was directly attacked the broader community of Hamilton took immediate and direct action. Two incidents immediately come to mind. One was in 2004 when a prominent gay business owner was nearly beaten to death at a downtown Hamilton bar by a 19-year-old man. Mayor Larry Dilanni called an Emergency Meeting of Strengthening Hamilton's Community Initiative (SHCI) at City Hall and leaders of Hamilton's

Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian faith communities along with leaders in business, education, public service, labour and politics not only condemned what happened, but proactively came up with tactics and strategies to end hate in our city.

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

  

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The Anvil

children in our march and they needed to be warned and given an alternative route to get to the park. All decisions were made while marching down the street into a sea of angry red and green team shirts with me sending runners to relay messages to marchers both ahead and behind us. We were especially thrown since we had visited every business along the street prior to the march to give them posters to hang in their windows and Rainbow Flags to wave as we went by. We had overwhelming support over the years and expected another warm welcome along James St N as we marched by. We even had a young male Portuguese soccer fan meet us at City Hall just after our rally with his giant Portugal flag asking if he could march with us and wave his flag so we could have a double celebration. We happily said OF COURSE! Before we even reached Cannon Street his "friends" violently removed him and his flag from our march. Queer community members who were hanging out on pubs along the way to cheer us on warned us that several folks were shouting out "faggot" in Portuguese to members of our community. We would find out later that a young gay man who was there attending his very first Pride was so traumatized he attempted suicide the very next day. That day I was so focused on taking care of my queer community and making sure they were all safe that it didn't hit me just how traumatized I was by what happened until I left the park to go to Jackson Square to buy a top for a Pride Concert I was singing at that night. While in the change room I started violently shaking and had to sit on the

Another incident was in 2006. Hamilton Pride's March from City Hall to Pier 4 Park along James Street North was violently attacked by Portuguese Soccer fans whose team had just won a game at the World Cup. Again the leadership of the broader community spoke up and spoke out. I remember the tremendous guilt I felt at the time. I literally lead my queer community into danger. In the moment I had to encourage members of the community and my organizing committee to deescalate the conflict and to not engage with those who would cause us harm. We had families with

floor and do some breathing exercises to calm myself down.

After that year I would step down along with most of my organizing team from sitting on the Hamilton Pride Committee. Not because of what happened on James Street North, but because the core group of us had been organizing the event together for nearly a decade and were burnt out. New leadership came on board and some of those old divides came back again and with a vengeance. The year Hamilton Pride officially uninvited the police and military from partaking in their event caused a lot of conflict for our queer community. I remember coming to the AGM that year wanting to speak out against that decision and how indelicately and inelegantly it was communicated to the community at large. I never did get the chance to speak on that issue, but I remember walking into the meeting room at the AIDS Network and the tension in the room could have been cut with a knife. It was ugly. The men were on one side of the room and the women were on another. Some of the violent misogynist remarks coming out of the mouths of gay men I had considered friends while I waited to get into the room and to speak were profoundly disturbing. I also became annoyed by a spokesperson who advocated for a sub-committee who's role was to ensure that Pride was more inclusive and welcoming to those in the community who are more vulnerable (Ex: Transgender, People of Colour, disabled, poor, ... etc.). A laudable goal, but they used very new language and terms from academia which many of the working class and blue collar community

members in the room didn't know or didn't understand so it created yet another divide in the room. It wasn't pretty.



A few years later the rumour mill started swirling that the current members of Hamilton Pride had left town and walked off with the proceeds from the previous year's event. A rumour that seemed to be verified when my former Treasurer started getting phone calls from the financial institution we used to work with telling him that the Pride account was in arrears and he was the only signing authority left on the books whose phone number wasn't disconnected or out of service. An emergency community meeting was called and Pride was saved from an untimely death due to the help of grassroots activists and labour unions.

But there was a major cultural and political shift from those in attendance: a rejection of capitalist systems to support our event, law enforcement having a presence and inviting political leaders to speak. For the majority of those in attendance there wasn't the need or desire to be accepted by mainstream heteronormative culture. There was a rejection of assimilation and a need to reassert our very clear differences as LGBTQI2SA+ people. Language around power and privilege has become the norm for most of us who are leaders and activists in the queer community, but to steal some language from my labour work I am not as convinced that it has been adopted and truly understood by the rank and file within our community.

Conflict still simmers within the LGBTQI2SA+ community around Black Lives Matter Toronto calling out Toronto Pride on their systemic racism and demanding police not be allowed to show up in uniform or participate in the event. Toronto Pride, which is now lead by Executive Director Olivia Nuamah, a queer black woman, officially uninvited Toronto Police from taking part in celebrations this year. After the deaths of multiple gay men at the hands of a serial killer and the bungled victim blaming investigation by Toronto Police the relationship between LGBTQI2SA+ communities and police has been further fractured. Black Lives Matter Toronto and the serial killer who targeted gay men in Toronto are reminding the LGBTQI2SA+ community what the roots of Toronto Pride were originally about. Toronto Pride was a protest march against police brutality. Toronto Pride was birthed after

Toronto Police raided gay men's bathhouses in 1981 and destroyed gay businesses and lives.



My relationship with law enforcement has also shifted as I have had more lived direct experience of systemic homophobia and misogyny in my personal encounters with police. I have also opened my eyes and ears to the stories shared by people of colour, indigenous peoples, mental health advocates, gender non-conforming people, and more about the violence, ignorance, racism, and discrimination they have experienced at the hands of police. The days of Officer Buckle teaching my Elementary School about "stranger danger" and looking at Police Officers as benevolent protectors have long since passed. There are individual Police Officers I have had worked collaboratively and positively with, but

law enforcement as an institution is highly problematic.

Not all laws are created equal and not all laws are enforced equally on all people. Too often the most vulnerable among us become the easiest targets for law enforcement to abuse and harass. The Police's current role is to maintain order and often that means upholding the systems that keep the dominant culture in power and everyone else "in their place". So instead of protecting the most vulnerable among us power structures, like white supremacy, racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, cisgenderism, classism, colourism, lookism, sizeism, nativism, ageism, and colonialism, are reinforced rather than dismantled. To dismantle these destructive systems goes against the mandate and role of police as we currently know them to exist.

There is a deeper conversation to unpack about reimagining what policing can mean as we start to dismantle oppressive systems. What if police were not a force based on a hierarchy paramilitary structure, but rather had a mandate centered on peace, compassion and love? What could policing look like?

There is also a deeper conversation to be had about how capitalism reinforces these oppressive structures. Far too often people conflate capitalism with democracy as if these two systems had parallel desired outcomes. Capitalism's goal is based on profit. Everything is focused on the goal of profits above all else. Democracy is about giving every single citizen an equal voice. As the power of capitalism continues to grow the

oppressive systems all around us have created an even deeper divide between the haves and the have nots. When economic times were good we didn't feel the impact of these systems as strongly. Now as everything about the cost of living rises at astounding rates from food, to clothing, to housing, to healthcare, to energy there is an inevitable blow back.



... *Pride and Hate in Hamilton, continued from page 5*

wanting to speak out against that decision and how delicately and inelegantly it was communicated to the community at large. I never did get the chance to speak on that issue, but I remember walking into the meeting room at the AIDS Network and the tension in the room could have been cut with a knife. It was ugly. The men were on one side of the room and the women were on another. Some of the violent misogynist remarks coming out of the mouths of gay men I had considered friends while I waited to get into the room and to speak were profoundly disturbing. I also became annoyed by a spokesperson who advocated for a sub-committee whose role was to ensure that Pride was more inclusive and welcoming to those in the community who are more vulnerable (e.g., transgender, People of Colour, disabled, poor... etc.). A laudable goal, but they used very new language and terms from academia which many of the working class and blue collar community members in the room didn't know or didn't understand so it created yet another divide in the room. It wasn't pretty.

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But there was a major cultural and political shift from those in attendance: a rejection of capitalist systems to support our event, law enforcement having a presence and inviting political leaders to speak. For the first time in attendance there wasn't the need or desire to be accepted by mainstream heteronormative culture. There was a rejection of assimilation and a need to reassert our very clear differences as LGBTQ2SA+ people. Language around power and privilege has become the norm for most of us who are leaders and activists in the queer community but to steal some language from my labour work am not as convinced that it has been adopted and truly understood by the rank and file within our community.

Conflict still simmers within the LGBTQ2SA+ community around Black Lives Matter Toronto calling on Toronto Pride on their systemic racism and demanding police not be allowed to show up in uniform to participate in the event. Toronto Pride, which is now led by Executive Director Olivia Nuamah, a Black woman, officially uninvited Toronto Police from taking part in celebrations this year. After the death of multiple gay men at the hands of a serial killer the bungled victim blaming investigation by Toronto Police, the relationship between LGBTQ2SA+ communities and police has been further fractured. Lives Matter Toronto and the serial killer who targeted gay men in Toronto are reminding the LGBTQ community what the roots of Toronto Pride originally about. Toronto Pride was a protest against police brutality. Toronto Pride was born after Toronto Police raided gay men's bathhouses in 1981 and destroyed gay businesses and lives. My relationship with law enforcement has also

The anarchists who rioted on Locke Street were trying to bring attention to this inequality. Sadly their violent tactics led the community in protecting capitalist systems with even more fervour rather than questioning those systems. It's unfortunate that their violent tactics muddled their message. Questioning the profit motive and critically observing how gentrification displaces our most vulnerable are issues that seriously need to be tackled. When we talk about economic growth in our city, we must ask:

is everyone truly benefiting from that growth? Just because you CAN double or triple rents does that mean that you SHOULD. If the fundamentals we need to survive - food, clothing, shelter - are out of reach for the majority of us in the community than is this a society that can truly thrive? An even more profound question is this a society that we want to thrive?

A couple of years ago I was in a community theatre production of Cabaret playing a sex worker living in a boarding house in Berlin's gay village hanging out with LGBTQI2SA+ characters who frequented and worked at a queer bar during the rise of Nazism just prior to the start of World War Two. While this drama was playing out on stage the real life drama of the US Presidential Election was playing out in our lives. A sense of dread was growing inside me as I saw the parallels of what happened then and what was happening now. Hate has been building across the globe and behaviour that was once considered repugnant has now become the norm. With the election of PC Leader Doug Ford as the Premier of Ontario I am nearly drowning in disillusionment. Much like Trump he spewed nonsense, had no election platform, attacked the marginalized, and was riddled in scandal, yet Ford won a majority government. Once again an unqualified man won over a highly competent woman.

This leads us to Hamilton Pride in 2018. On May 26, 2018 in Dunnville a Hate Group sabotaged Haldimand-Norfolk Pride Celebrations. They arrived with 12 foot signs riddled with hate speech and a

sound system to broadcast their hate and drown out the live performers who came to entertain everyone. They advocated for the genocide of LGBTQI2SA+ people and also spewed Islamophobia at everyone. The same group on the same weekend also showed up at Anime North in Toronto a long running science fiction convention. They brought their hate signs and shouted out homophobic, misogynist and Islamophobic hate speech at attendees. A couple of days later the official opening of The Stratford Festival with Martha Henry playing the role of Prospero in Shakespeare's The Tempest was shut down due to a bomb threat. My queer, geek, and theatre communities all became targets for hate and violence. What was happening?

An emergency meeting of Hamilton's LGBTQI2SA+ community was held on June 5, 2018 at the MacNab Street YWCA. Those who were in Dunnville shared what had transpired. It was even more frightening than we had imagined. The police, instead of shutting down the hate, asked the Pride organizers to allow the hate mongers – the people calling for genocide - to have equal air time at their event. After the event was over the hate group showed up at the clerk's office for the municipality and demanded to find out the names of the permit holders for both the park and the sound system for Haldimand-Norfolk Pride. They then showed up at the homes of the permit holders and harassed them some more.

Several of the hate mongers who showed up at Haldimand-Norfolk Pride and Anime North were from the United States. They regularly spew hate on their

social media pages. There was a feeling at first that these hateful people were not Canadians, but infiltrators from the USA. We found out that sadly many involved in this group are homegrown haters living and organizing right here in Hamilton and self-identifying as a Christian Faith Group.

Only last year the Hamilton Pride March and Rally was relocated and rerouted because a local hate group has planned to have a Rally at City Hall on the same date and time as the LGBTQI2SA+ community.

Hamilton's LGBTQI2S+ communities put their heads together on June 5th to prepare for the likelihood that this hate group will target our Pride event on Sunday, June 17th at Gage Park. We also asked for solidarity and support from our allies to ensure that the event remains a safe space for everyone and that hate won't be tolerated.

I have experienced homophobia and hate in my 20 plus years of queer activism, but nothing quite like this. I have never experienced in my lifetime groups that have proactively organized themselves to openly disrupt and shut down our Pride Celebrations and advocate hate, violence and genocide against the LGBTQI2S+ community. Never so boldly or brazenly. In the past attacks against us usually had at least a thin veneer of civility to them. I have sat through school board meetings where right wing faith groups tried to shut down equity policies or gay-straight alliance clubs. I have sat through City Hall meetings in which our trans community

members mere existence was turned into fodder to stoke fear and misinformation. In those spaces there are rules of order and procedure which ensure a system of fairness and justice for those involved. But this ... this is an entirely new animal. A beast that has been growing and festering for several years now.

I'm filled with fear and sadness and despair. I think of my Grandpa and Grandma Miklos who escaped to Canada during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. They survived Nazi and Communist regimes only to have their granddaughter experience a whole new generation of hate which they thought had been vanquished.

An attack on the LGBTQI2SA+ community is an attack on us all. The Nazi Regime persecuted Jews, Roma, Slavic peoples, immigrants, people with disabilities, social democrats, labour unionists, Jehovah's Witnesses, LGBTQI2SA+ people, sex workers and more. Sound familiar? People laughed off Adolph Hitler and never believed the citizens of Germany would elect him to be their leader. Many people couldn't believe that Americans would vote for Donald Trump as President, Ontarians would vote for Doug Ford as Premiere, or Torontonians would vote for Rob Ford as Mayor.

In the musical Cabaret characters go to the Kit Kat Klub to escape from their troubles and ignore what is happening all around them. We don't have that luxury anymore. We need to stay woke. We need to end this cycle of hate. Now. Our future depends on it.