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Maynooth Pride stands in solidarity with Black Lives Matter movement



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By Nate Smelle

Every year for nearly the past three decades, members of the local LGBTQ2S community and their allies have gathered in Hastings Highlands over the August long weekend to celebrate Pride. Having been instrumental in the organization of this annual celebration since its inception, Joey Shulman said in recent years it has evolved into more of a "party with a purpose." While the event has always been about celebrating diversity and inclusion, he said last year organizers used the opportunity to raise awareness about Hastings Highlands council's decision not to amend its flag policy so that the Pride flag could be flown outside the municipal offices. Explaining why organizers of the Maynooth Pride party still feel compelled to use the event as a platform for social justice a year later, Shulman said "The idea that we have to wait for our elected officials to lead the way is obviously not what we are experiencing right now, so we will lead the way for them."

Although restrictions on the size of social gatherings in place because of the COVID-19 pandemic prevented organizers from holding as large of a celebration as usual, that didn't stop community members from coming out and taking to the streets for this year's Pride promenade in downtown Maynooth on Sunday, Aug. 2. In order to keep people safe during the gathering, Shulman said

participants were encouraged to wear face masks and practice physical distancing. In addition, he said North Hastings Family Pharmacy donated masks and sanitization stations for the event.As a showing of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, Shulman indicated that all the proceeds raised during the celebration would be going to Anti-Racism North Hastings to help the group with its efforts to fight racism in the community.

On numerous occasions in his life, Shulman has come face-to-face with homophobia and discrimination. Despite this experience, he said he has never felt afraid of being killed because of the colour of his skin."It's hard to fathom," said Shulman, "to be a parent and wake up each day terrified that that people who you pay to enforce peace are in fact the cause of the death of your child. There is this horrible feeling that if you criticize police violence against people of colour, Indigenous people that you are anti-police, but that's not true. I am the first one to contact 9-1-1 if I feel threatened. But, that doesn't mean I don't want some of my tax dollars to go to mental health training, so a wellness call doesn't end up in a murder."Highlighting how people need to be coming together now more than ever, Shulman said it is the perfect time to take a stand against racism, homophobia, and all forms of hate-based discrimination. With the world currently in a similar state of disarray as it was after the Second World War, he said people need to pay attention to what history has taught us about the role that the silent citizenry played in facilitating the rise of Nazism in Germany.

Describing how members of Anti-Racism North Hastings were verbally abused by a small group of residents while putting up Black Lives Matter signs outside the United Church in Maynooth; and how volunteers putting up a 50-foot Pride flag for the celebration in Maynooth over the weekend had a similar experience, Shulman said "You don't have to go far to find prejudice."He continued "It was quite a negative response. The same folks came out to glare at us when we were putting up the flag. It's funny but when you have been arrested and you have marched for rights you see how bullies just deflate. It's a lesson I learned growing up that bullies are mostly air. When you prick them, when you stand up to that air it deflates. And what is behind it are some very insecure people who can't stand change [and are] mourning the loss of what they felt was normal."

As one of the founding members of Anti-Racism North Hastings and an organizer with the Maynooth Pride celebration, Svinda Heinrichs has experienced this hate-based discrimination firsthand. Referring to another hateful incident where a young man from Harcourt named Evan Natale was verbally assaulted by two residents while he was out for a walk, she said people need to ask themselves why for some individuals it is acceptable to treat other human beings in such a degrading way.

?It is for Evan and Evans that we march today, that we are gathering today,? declared Heinrichs.?Evans are everywhere and there are people who do that to Evans all over the place, and it is gross. We need to be able to say to Evan as a young queer guy you're not alone, you do belong, you are a good person, you occupy a special place in this world and we are glad you are alive, and we are glad you are who you are.?

It is this message of belonging that is at the heart of why it is important for the community to celebrate Pride, explained Heinrichs. Pointing out how the pandemic has caused many people to experience that feeling of isolation and being alone, she said this year's Pride celebration was especially important.

?It's easy to feel isolated and alone, and like you are the only one normally, but normally we would be bumping into each other in different places and seeing each other, but that just hasn't been happening for months,? said Heinrichs.?I just thought it was really important for us to get together, to remind ourselves that we are not alone, that we are here together ? and to remind ourselves that we are in fact part of the community and that we do belong. That's such a core thing for every person to feel ? a sense of belonging.?

Even though as a member of the LGBTQ2S community Heinrichs recognizes similarities between the fights to eliminate racism and homophobia, she said it is important to understand that they are each their own unique struggle.

?Because we do live on the margins of society, we have an understanding of what it feels like not to belong, to feel like you are being told just to go away, to hide yourself and not make yourself known,? Heinrichs said.?The flip-side of knowing that and having that put on us is that we can understand what it is like for other people and other groups who are pushed aside and told 'we know you are here, but we don't want to hear from you. We want you to be quiet and be happy with whatever it is that you've got.?

Heinrichs continued ?We are a largely white queer community up here, so I don't want to claim that I understand what it is like to be Black, or Indigenous in the world, because I don't know what it is like. As a white, middle-aged, middle-class woman I can hide my identity, but when you are not white, you can't hide.?

Acknowledging that there is a diversity of opinions within the LGBTQ2S community, Heinrichs indicated that there appears to be a common desire to see Hastings Highlands council do more to understand homophobia and practice inclusion. As difficult and uncomfortable as this ?work? is, she said it is absolutely necessary if they want to ensure that every resident feels like they belong.

?In our society we need to be very mindful that there are ways that we make people feel like the 'other' in our communities ? and that needs to stop,? said Heinrichs.?I am not saying it's easy work or it's fun work. I don't like looking at myself in a way that I don't live up to my own hopes and expectations. But, it is necessary and it is required if we are going to have any change in our society.?

By the time the Pride celebration wrapped up, Heinrichs said they managed to raise approximately $200 for Anti-Racism North Hastings to carry on with its efforts promoting social justice and equality. She also informed Bancroft This Week that over the weekend two of Anti-Racism North Hastings' signs had been vandalized with homophobic and anti-Semitic graffiti.