

Remembering when it wasn't OK to be gay

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Couple marched through hate, homophobia, all in the name of love

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The first Halifax Pride Parade was held in 1987. This photo was taken from a 1988 newsletter. (The Chronicle Herald archive)

Mike Sangster marched with a paper bag over his head.

Alan Stewart walked past homophobic slurs.

About 70 others stepped to the terrible taunts of different times.

The chants of change.

And the beat of history.

“Hey hey, no no, the status quo has got to go,” the Halifax protesters called out 25 years ago.

“Faggots,” bystanders jeered back.

“One, two, three, four. Our rights are what we’re fighting for,” the men and women chanted along local streets.

Click, click, click, click — the spectators aimed their invisible guns.

“Five, six, seven, eight. Legislate. Without the wait!” they continued on as strangers formed their fingers into weapons and hurled angry insults that amaze Stewart still.

“Obscenities terribly disgusting” obscenities, he recalls, sitting outside today with his longtime partner Sangster, a rainbow pride flag blowing in the breeze, memories flowing like it was yesterday.

And so began Halifax's first gay pride parade, more of a protest really back then, when being gay in Nova Scotia could get you fired or evicted or even killed.

And taunted too, for standing up for your rights.

Today, thousands march in, or take in, what Stewart calls "probably the biggest, most popular parade in Halifax."

Bystanders clap and cheer. Spectators, advertisers, police and many politicians embrace a festival that "celebrates" who people are and how far they've come.

But when the 25th annual pride parade winds through Halifax today, some will also be looking back — to very different days, to people like Sangster and Stewart, who took those first daunting steps toward equality.

"I applaud those folks because they got us here," says this year's Halifax Pride chairwoman Krista Snow, overseeing the 25th year of a parade and gay pride week festivities that have helped change lives.

It took "an unbelievable amount of courage."

In 1988, the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act didn't protect people on the basis of sexual orientation or illness. Gay Nova Scotians could be evicted from their apartments, refused service in bars and restaurants, fired from their jobs because of their sexuality. Or for having HIV-AIDS.

In 1988, Eric Smith, a gay teacher on Cape Sable Island, was still fighting to get his job back, after being fired the year before for having HIV as hysteria about the disease and prejudice against homosexuals raged on.

In November of 1988, John William Tha Din was beaten to death in Camp Hill Cemetery, then a known gay cruising area.

And "gay bashings," says Sangster, "were common."

"Especially in June, with schools getting out," adds Stewart, now 70 and recovering from recent knee replacement surgeries. "All the young people would sort of get together to celebrate the end of the school year and they would pick up their baseball bats and go out looking for gay people to beat up."

Those kinds of threats, and the lack of other legal protections in Nova Scotia, fuelled that first march in the summer of 1988, says longtime gay rights activist Chris Aucoin, who's prepared an exhibit about the '88 march for today's festivities (on display at the community fair on the Garrison Grounds right after the parade).

Many people today don't realize just how "physically dangerous" it was to be gay 25 years ago, Aucoin says. Even at the public parade, people worried about their safety, some purposely staying in the middle to avoid being attacked. And one driver, he says, actually did try to ram his car through the marchers as bystanders spewed obscenities and veiled threats from the sidelines.

Stewart, who also helped organize the original event, still vividly recalls the insults and the images coming his way.

"There would be protesters along the route protesting us," says the retired court clerk and justice of the peace. "I remember coming down Brunswick Street in the first parade — first protest march. As we passed the Citadel Inn and here was this man — I'd say probably in his early 30s with two young children — standing on the steps of the sidewalk yelling obscenities at us. And I was thinking: 'behaving like that and talking like that with these two children alongside of him,' " he says, shaking his head.

"Things about faggots and this and that and all kinds of sexual innuendos."

"That was fairly common in the old days," says Sangster, 61, on disability for a heart condition, HIV positive and a longtime activist for people with that disease.

Other spectators made silent threats, says Aucoin, who's interviewed a number of the original marchers for today's exhibit.

"Pointing their fingers as if it was (a gun), like clicking it as people walked by as if it was a shooting range. That was part of the context of the time and that was acceptable within the general community at the time. It might have been at the extreme end of things but that sort of environment was the reality and the lack of public visibility was part of the vicious cycle.

“Very, very few people were publicly out because of concerns about economic safety in terms of their job, because of physical safety. But because very few people were out, there (were) very few people to challenge the stereotypes of the day.”

Mike Sangster was out. But at that first march he wore, along with about 20 others, a paper bag over his head.

“Some people wore it practically as a way of disguising themselves and others wore it as a way of showing protest — that we had to be hidden,” says Stewart about his partner of 18 years, sitting beside him on their Dartmouth deck.

“And he was one of the hiding ones. Not because he felt he had to be hidden; he just wanted to show that this is a problem.”

Sangster says that was part of it, but he did feel some fear too at a time when no one knew how they might be punished for public seeking legal protection that finally came in 1991, the year Nova Scotia added sexual orientation and illness to its Human Rights Act.

After that, the parade moved — step-by-step — toward the celebratory festival it is today, with music and dancing and floats and fanfare for straights and gays.

But Aucoin, who first marched in 1990, and Snow, who joined the parade a little later, say no one should forget the prejudices, or the progress, of the past.

It’s his motivation for the exhibit — a “snapshot in time” that he hopes informs the future.

“Even within the gay and lesbian community, people under 30 have no concept because they didn’t live through it and we’ve not done a very good job of passing on our history within the community,” he says. “Unless we tell them, they’re not going to know.”

“We wouldn’t have half of what we have today ,” without them, Snow says of those marchers in the first parade and other early years, when taunts continued.

“We have to remember those people,” she says. “We owe the early folks, the pioneers, the respect to not forget, and thank them for where they brought us.”

Sangster and Stewart, naming a long list of other pioneers, say they were just two of many who fought the good fight, still not over in a world where gay children are still bullied and gay adults are still murdered.

The case is still before the courts, but a spectre of the past appeared again last April when beloved gay activist Raymond Taavel was killed in downtown Halifax.

And other struggles remain, says Aucoin, noting transgender people are still not specifically protected under Nova Scotia legislation.

But today, he and Snow and Sangster and Stewart — and many, many others — take pride in what’s come before.

“It’s a milestone,” says Stewart as the rainbow flag flutters in the wind, as he and Sangster share the open, comfortable, familiar love of changed times.

“And it’s been a long march and there’s been accomplishments as a result. And if we didn’t have that first march that first year and followed up, none of this would have ever happened.

“It was worthwhile.”

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