



The Importance of Rural

Pride Celebrations

By Frank Emanuele | Photos courtesy of Strathroy Pride

When I was approached to help plan for the very first Strathroy Pride in 2020, I wasn't convinced this town was ready. I had only been living here for a couple of years and I kept a bit to myself. Besides, with quick access to several major cities that host fabulous pride festivals, is there really a need for a quaint town like Strathroy to have their own Pride celebration?

And then I started listening to people's stories. Conversations about growing up LGBTQ2+ in rural towns don't come up easily. Many people who identify as queer or questioning don't have many opportunities to talk about their identity, sexuality, or their feelings. So when a safe space comes to light, the stories start pouring out. I learned of a lesbian couple who had been in town for over 15 years and never meet another gay person. I heard of a family raising a transgender daughter, a transgender man who worked at the grocery store, and then another couple who were transitioning together. I met a gay man who had just moved to town to enjoy a quieter lifestyle. Another common story I hear is that growing up, there was never anyone "like me" that

people could relate to. So even if we're not "loud and proud", LGBTQ2+ community members are all around us, living their lives like everyone else.

Unfortunately, one of the reasons for the quieter queer lifestyle in small towns is fear: fear for one's safety, of vandalism, or of hate speech; fear of loss of family and friends; fear of being ostracised and losing support systems. Rural towns don't offer the safety of numbers or the anonymity to hide in that a larger city can offer. Isolation, depression, suicidal tendencies, and drug addictions are quite common for LGBTQ2+ youth – and the statistics are significantly higher in rural communities. It is little wonder why many queer youth leave their hometowns as soon as they are able to.

Pride celebrations in rural communities offer a safe space for people to connect, share experiences, and support each other. Visibility and representation are essential for our community to show acceptance and provide positive role models for our youth. It's important to normalize all forms of identities and to offer families the opportunity to talk to their kids about inclusion and love. I think



the most important reason we need Pride celebrations is to help improve mental health in our LGBTQ2+ youth and – in some cases – save lives.

In July of 2020, Strathroy celebrated our very first Pride celebration and the reception was overwhelmingly positive. We commemorated the day in a way that made sense for our town and despite COVID restrictions, we were able to raise the Rainbow flag at town hall to a small, socially distant audience. A shared experience of peace, acceptance, validity and love was felt that day, and it gave the Strathroy Pride committee the soul food we needed to continue.

Strathroy Pride will be celebrating its second annual celebration on July 10th. Please visit Strathroypride.org for more details. 📍

