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"Calgary and Alberta have been big heel-draggers when it comes to sexual orientation and gender diversity rights. I think that's made the gay community's activism all that more striking"

—Kevin Allen

## Pride in a conservative culture

Despite decentralized gay community, support for pride week is growing ▶ ALYSSA QUIRICO

It's arguable that an indicator of a forward-thinking metropolitan city is having an active and centralized queer community. Folks can find safety and comfort travelling to neighbourhoods like the Castro in San Francisco, the west village in Toronto, or Davie Street in Vancouver.

However, Pride Calgary president Stephen Wright says that even though Calgary has areas like the Beltline, where there is a higher gay concentration, the city's queer community is uniquely spread out. Because of this, Calgary pride celebrations appear to be less boisterous and tend to attract fewer people than some other major cities. Each year, hundreds of thousands of people attend pride in Toronto and Montreal, and an estimated 500,000 people attended Vancouver pride earlier this month. In Calgary, between 35,000 and 40,000 people attended last year.

But despite the city's more conservative culture, over the last two decades Calgary pride has continued to garner more participation and support from queer folks, allies and even the corporate sector.

### PROGRESS THROUGH HISTORY

Until homosexuality was decriminalized in Canada in 1969, the gay community was a hidden one, retreating to underground bars and private member clubs. Kevin Allen, lead researcher at the Calgary Gay History Project, says that until the '70s, gay people across Canada were living in a culture of intimidation. "You could pretty much argue that homosexuals were universally despised and denigrated," says Allen.

As the civil rights movement swept across North America in the '70s and '80s, university students, among other Calgarians, were protesting for equal rights for all people, including gays. But as momentum grew, there was also backlash.

Allen personally recalls pride marches in Calgary in his teens in the late '80s and early '90s. "I remember pick-up trucks with young men and baseball bats, 'hunting.' And there were lots of gay bashings. Hate crimes were really high."

According to Pride Calgary, the first official one-day pride march was in June 1990 at Central Memorial Park.

"Calgary and Alberta have been

big heel-draggers when it comes to sexual orientation and gender diversity rights," says Allen. "I think that's made the gay community's activism all that more striking. It might have been easier to be a gay activist in downtown Toronto in 1979."

Since then, pride has grown from a protest for freedom to a celebration of self-acceptance and authenticity, especially after gay marriage was legalized in Canada in 2005. Nearly five years ago, the celebration, which is completely volunteer-run, grew from a one-day parade and festival to a week-long celebration with even more kick-off events happening the week before.

### FINDING REFUGE IN PRIDE

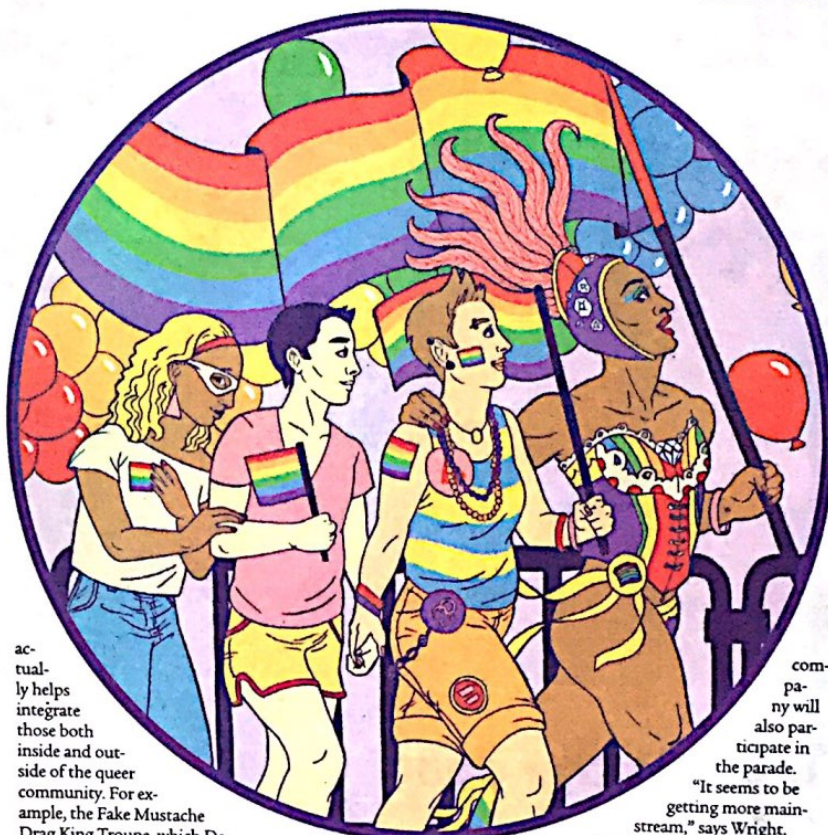
Over the years, efforts to create a centralized queer community in the downtown core have suffered. Bars like Club Sapien and the Calgary Eagle have shut their doors forever. Today, only three gay bars exist in Calgary, and Wright says most people in the queer community are frequenting "straight bars," despite an expressed desire for more queer establishments.

Allen describes the local gay community as highly corporate and affluent. Wright says that because of the overarched oil and gas industry, people seem to be more closeted in public spaces. They also suggest that Calgary's urban sprawl has some influence on the absence of a more prominent social centre.

Local resident Michelle Meredith, who will be attending her third Calgary pride this year, says she would love to see a queer community more like that of Vancouver's, where she's also attended pride. "Their pride parade is very similar to the Calgary Stampede Parade — it brings out that many people," she says.

Meredith says it's possible some people won't support more queer establishments here like they do in Vancouver for fear of being "gay bashed" or physically harmed by being openly gay in public. She says it's just a more "popular" or accepted lifestyle in other cities than in Calgary, where gays are stifled by the political and sometimes religious landscape.

On the other hand, according to James Demers, who volunteered on the Pride Calgary board from 2008 to 2011, not having a "gay village"



actually helps integrate those both inside and outside of the queer community. For example, the Fake Mustache Drag King Troupe, which Demers is involved in, performs at Dickens Pub — a normally straight bar that "turns gay for a night," he says. "If you go to your favourite bar and suddenly there's a gay event there you wouldn't normally have gone to on your own and you have a good time, I think that allows for a certain amount of integration," he says.

Wright argues the city's decentralized queer community makes pride that much more meaningful because it brings people everyone together in places where they can feel comfortable and safe. "I think it's a space where they can be themselves and they don't have to worry about being seen by employers... or even if their employer is there, they just feel fine about that," he says.

Demers says that Calgary's less corporate and more grassroots pride is something to be appreciated as it allows queer organizations to work together more closely. He says community members are more highly represented in Calgary Pride than in Toronto or Vancouver, where he's also helped organize events.

In fact, one queer organization is holding a separate march this year. In addition to the annual Pride Calgary Parade taking place on Sunday, August 31, this year marks the first Dyke and Trans march during pride week, which will be held on Saturday, August 30. The event is being organized by the Cal-

gary Dyke March and the Outlink Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity to raise awareness for the often marginalized trans community.

Wright acknowledges that in cities across the country, some groups like those in the trans community often feel underrepresented by pride celebrations. "We try and include them and we do what we can," he says.

### A PROUD FUTURE

The support and reaction from those outside the gay community towards Pride Calgary has evolved, even in recent years. Wright says that only seven years ago, Pride Calgary had a mere 5,000 people in total watching and attending festival events. Last year, parade participation spiked, with 82 parade entries for 2013 compared to about a dozen in previous years. The 2014 parade will include roughly 100 entries, and all 50 vendor spaces were also sold out for parade day.

Meredith says during her first Pride Calgary celebration only three years ago, she recalls only a handful of events. This year, Pride Calgary's website lists over 20, with several groups and organizations involved.

One of the most notable indications of change this year is the fact Pride Calgary has its first ever energy sponsor, Shell Canada. The

company will also participate in the parade.

"It seems to be getting more mainstream," says Wright.

"They want to be part of making history."

Shell Canada has been named one of the Top 100 among Canada's Best Diversity Employers, which recognizes businesses with exceptional diversity and inclusion programs. Wright hopes more energy companies will follow suit.

"I think pride announces to others that Calgary's a cosmopolitan city, a city that embraces diversity," says Allen. He adds that from an economic perspective, it shows that diversity can also equal prosperity.

Wright says he hopes to see the number of participants grow towards 60,000 in coming years, which would involve more community involvement and support.

However, Allen suggests there is still work to do in creating more awareness and attention towards trans issues and homophobia that still exist in our community.

Pride Calgary has already started planning next year's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. Wright says volunteers are making efforts to include more educational events and programs, such as panel discussions about relevant events and issues.

"If someone takes away from it that maybe they can change how they treat people or just accept people for who they are, then our mission is accomplished with that." ■

▶ PRIDE CALGARY takes place from August 22 to September 1 at various venues.