Nanaimo mayor won't proclaim Pride

Gay community remains undeterred

ISLAND PRIDE

Nathaniel Christopher

DESPITE opposition from civic officials and division within the gay community, Nanaimo's 10th Pride festival will go ahead this week.

"We want to celebrate being gay," says Ian Austin, president of the Vancouver Island Rainbow Association, which is hosting the event. "It's our basic, big once-a-year celebration for the community. Hopefully it'll bring the community closer together too."

Quiet in comparison to Vancouver Pride, Nanaimo's celebrations consist of a flag raising ceremony at city hall, a picnic in the park, a swim, coffee, a cocktail reception and a dance. There is no parade.

Despite this, gay Pride in Nanaimo has been a contentious issue in recent years.

In 2000 Nanaimo mayor Gary Korpan and four city councillors vacated the council chamber when it came time to vote on a motion to declare Aug 5, 2000 "lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Pride day." Although the motion passed, the mayor went on record as opposing it.

"I was humiliated to be from Nanaimo when that happened," says Councillor Diane Brennan, an avid ally of Nanaimo's gay community who has signed the Pride proclamations in recent years.

The following year, Nanaimo's gay community hoped to avoid the same situation so they opted to take the word "gay" out of their proclamation, asking instead for a more generic Pride Day proclamation. The motion passed but the mayor and three councillors still voted against it.

In May 2002 the Pride proclamation was again defeated when the mayor cast the deciding vote against it. The decision was met with condemnation from the community, including the threat of a human rights complaint.

"We explained that this question had been litigated and it was clear they had no right to deny the proclamation and should they continue to deny this proclamation we'd take a human rights action against them," recalls Brennan. City councils can only refuse to proclaim Pride if they stop issuing all other proclamations as well.

"Part of a penalty we asked for was they'd have to take a GLBT course," Brennan notes.

Council reversed its decision and has passed the Pride proclamation with a majority ever since.

This year, Mayor Korpan, Councillor Loyd Sherry and Councillor Merv Unger again voted against the proclamation.

"When it came to our proclamation they were a little bit slow on raising their hands," says Austin. "They did it but sort of reluctantly, and then when it came time to vote against it the mayor just about jumped out of his seat and damn near jumped over his podium."

"I think everyone in Canada has the same rights, and again, no group should be separated out whether you're a one-legged certain ethnic group with green skin," says Unger on his decision to vote against the proclamation. "Separating people out, I think, it worsens any problems we have in society as putting them up to special attention and I think that's probably what some groups are trying to do but I just don't buy that."

Sherry, who was one of the four councillors who exited the chamber in 2000, refused to comment. Despite repeated calls, Korpan could not be reached for comment either.

A 2001 article in the Nanaimo Daily News quoted Korpan's stance on the issue. "I think any government that's being brought in to ratify, condone or involve itself in any way with sexual orientation of consenting adults walks into a dangerous quagmire," Korpan said.

A year later, he sent Xtra West this statement: "Government has no business encouraging, authorizing or condoning moving the private activities of consenting adults, no matter what their sexual orientation is, from the bedroom out into the public streets in full view of children."

Some members of Nanaimo's gay community were frustrated by the cautious approach the Rainbow Association, then known as Nanaimo Pride, took to some of the proclamations. A breakaway group incorporated itself as Nanaimo Gay Pride and hosted last year's Pride festivities in the city's more public waterfront area.

"It was time for Pride Nanaimo to come out of the closet," says Donald Mullan an organizer of the now-defunct Nanaimo Gay Pride. "That was something that had been discussed for years within the old Pride committee and it just wasn't moving forward. We were gaining no more visibility."

In an effort to remedy the situation, Mullan and his team branded the 2006 festivities Out in Nanaimo. "We tried to make ourselves more visible," he says.

However, a lack of community interest in Nanaimo Gay Pride prevented them from organizing the festivities this year. Mullan claims that nobody from the community attended their recent annual general meeting.

Rainbow Association board member John Lee, who was involved with the old Nanaimo Pride organization, defends his organization's cautious approach to Pride.

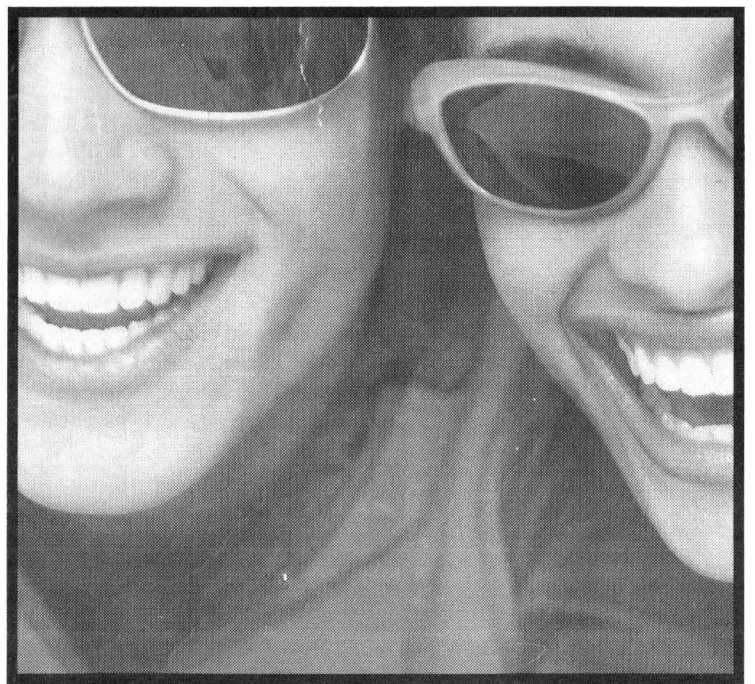
"We didn't want to put the word 'gay' into it. We didn't want to push the gay issue. We felt [the word] Pride was quite sufficient. There could have been negative connotations to it for some people."

This year Pride is again being organized by the Rainbow Association, which is run by six members of Nanaimo's gay community, some of whom were instrumental in organizing Nanaimo's first Pride festival in 1997.

"I'd really like to see younger people take over so we don't have to do it," says Austin. "We're all over 40. Basically we're all friends and we've met through various things that have been going on in the community."

"I think [Nanaimo's gay community] has been great in this whole exercise," says Brennan. "They've been dignified, they've been adamant, they've been out there and vocal and they make sure the week is a lot of fun."

NANAIMO PRIDE.
Picnic and swim at Bowen Park.
Jun 23, 11 am, 500 Bowen Rd.
10th Anniversary reception and dance.
Jun 23, 7 pm, Tania's Downtown Red Room, 1-75 Front St.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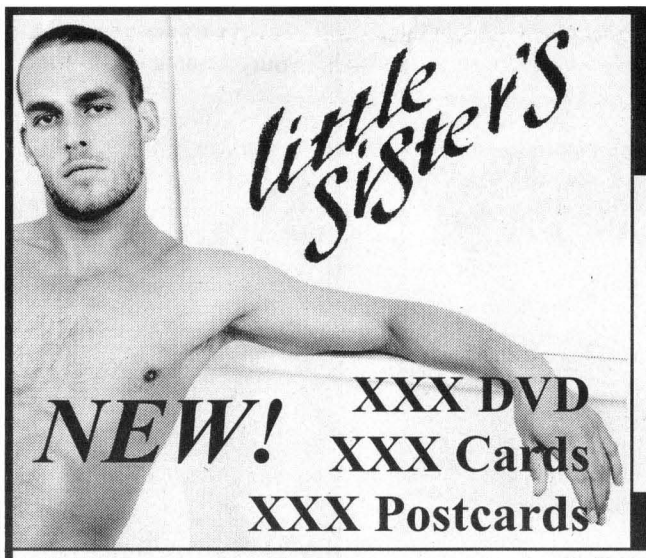

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