A Pride founder finds environmental purpose

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1/2 Jeremy Browning, founder of Annapolis Pride, poses by a new mural in the neighborhood of Eastport in Annapolis, Md., on June 21, 2019. (Photo by Will Parson/Chesapeake Bay Program)

The rainbow flag is a symbol of pride, power and community. Created in 1978 by [Gilbert Baker](#), a queer artist based in San Francisco, the flag's colors have been changed and reordered over the years, but the green stripe has always remained. The green band in the rainbow represents nature, and the ever-present line of green illustrates the inherent connection between queer people, those who are not heterosexual or cisgender, and the environment in which they live.

For Jeremy Browning, a deep relationship with nature was forged in his childhood. Born and raised "around the water" in Annapolis, Md., Browning explained that growing up on the Chesapeake Bay left him with a strong connection to the water. This led him to seek out a career in which he could work to protect and restore the water, eventually landing at the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, also in Annapolis.

In the summer of 2017, while working at the Alliance, Browning noticed that a nearby church had put up a pride flag. It was the first public pride flag Browning had seen in the city, and it gave him the idea to bring the flag to the Alliance. He saw how the pride flag spread visibility and awareness of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) folks in the Chesapeake Bay community, and seeing it in public made him, a gay man, feel safe. Seeing that flag started Browning on a journey to increase that visibility and subsequent safety across the Bay watershed.

The next summer, a pride flag was erected in front of the Alliance.

But Browning didn't stop there. He began to organize [Annapolis Pride](#), a grassroots group working to spread awareness of LGBTQ+ issues. He reached out to colleagues and friends for marketing support, and created a Facebook page, now with more than 6,500 followers.

Last year, Browning successfully asked Annapolis Mayor Gavin Buckley to declare June the city's first LGBTQ+ Pride Month. And now, after almost two years of organizing, Annapolis held its first-ever Pride Parade, thanks to the work of Browning and other Annapolis Pride volunteers. More than 50 groups and 80 vendors gathered in downtown Annapolis for the family-friendly event.

By bringing Pride to Annapolis, Browning is contributing to a nationwide trend, as more than 170 cities across North America are hosting Pride Parades in 2019 with millions of attendees.

"Pride celebrations are happening outside the beltway now," Browning explained. "You don't have to leave your own community; [you] don't have to travel to be yourself." More representation via flags and parades can make queer people feel safer, increasing their ability to enjoy public spaces and outdoor recreation.

Bringing Pride outside

Browning noted that for people in the LGBTQ+ community, "there are a lot of barriers [to getting outdoors] … it doesn't always feel like a safe space, so that's a challenge." Homophobia and bigotry have made many outdoor public spaces unsafe for queer folks, who "don't have the same access to the Chesapeake Bay or to recreation" as people outside of that community.

In the Chesapeake Bay especially, many of the opportunities for recreational activities are located in areas where queer people don't feel comfortable. "If you want to go out hiking or camping or enjoying different parts of the watershed, most of [those spaces] are not in urban areas," Browning explained. "For me, going to a rural area is not always the most comfortable thing because I don't know if it's a safe space."

The lack of visible pride and LGBTQ+ representation in these areas limits queer access to these outdoor spaces, leaving queer people with deep connections to nature without a place to enjoy it. "Hopefully by creating safe spaces and making the community safer, members of the [LGBTQ+] community will feel more comfortable being out in nature."

The intersection between environmentalism and LGBTQ+ representation extends beyond feeling safe in public—queer people are often subject to more environmental harms than their straight counterparts. In 2017, the National Institute of Health (NIH) released a study showing that "cancer risks from HAPs (harmful air pollutants) in Greater Houston are distributed inequitably with respect to the neighborhood-level composition of same-sex partner households." Another NIH study found that cancer and respiratory risks from HAPs for same-sex partners are greater than for heterosexual partners. These unjust environmental exposures indicate significant public health risks posed to predominantly gay neighborhoods.

Climate change may compound the environmental threat to the LGBTQ+ community. Poor people and those without stable housing are among the most vulnerable to negative climate change impacts. A study by the True Colors Foundation revealed that young queer people are 120 percent more likely to experience homelessness and that LGBTQ+ youth make up 40 percent of the homeless population in the U.S. Transgender people experience poverty at twice the rate of the U.S. population overall. Additionally, new research by the World Health Organization shows that gender-based violence increases after climate disasters like hurricanes, however, researchers have not yet discovered why exactly these environmental injustices occur.

Supporting the LGBTQ+ community

In the face of these environmental inequities, raising the pride flag may not be enough to protect the LQBTQ+ community. "It's one thing to put a flag out. [You have to] make sure to back that up with policy," Browning said.

"Now it's very trendy to be an ally… but you don't really get to call yourself an ally," he said. "It's up the community."

For organizations that want to ensure that queer people feel safe, Browning suggests reviewing guiding documents and policies to make sure an organization's mission is inclusive to the LGBTQ+ community. A great example of this is the Choose Clean Water Coalition's new diversity, equity, inclusion and justice guide. Browning added that using people's

preferred pronouns—he/him, she/her, they/them—is important to creating a safe environment as well.

"It's really important not to just talk the talk," Browning reminded, "but walk the walk."

A great way to walk that walk and show support to the LGBTQ+ community is to attend a Pride Parade. [Find one near you](#).

Learn more about the connection between [environmentalism and the LGBTQ+ movement](#).

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