

Glitter, tears and sunshine: Annapolis hosts first LGBTQ Pride Parade



Zack Bolin, 25, wore a flower bikini top and flip-flop skirt with a tiki umbrella twirling above a giant blonde afro sprouting flowers.



By **SELENE SAN FELICE**

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Jeremy Browning didn't see a single rainbow flag in Annapolis for the more than 30 years he grew up there as a gay man. Two years after he saw his first waving at St. Luke's Church, he made sure the town would be covered in them.

Browning founded Annapolis Pride last year, forming bonds with the city's government and institutions around Anne Arundel County. Saturday, Browning led Annapolis Pride in putting on the city's first pride parade — just a day after the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Inn riots in New York that marked LGBTQ resistance.

He's already planning next year's event, set for June 27, 2020. Howard County, which also celebrated its first parade Saturday, also plans to make pride a tradition.

Thousands lined West Street between Amos Garrett Boulevard and Calvert Street to watch as rainbow-covered politicians, police officers, firefighters and business owners marched with drag queens and LGBTQ community members.



Claire Drapaeu, 13, led the parade as grand marshal, walking with friends draped in pride flags ahead of Mayor Gavin Buckley.

Drapeau organized last year's Pride. Too eager to wait for a parade, the gender-fluid teen handed out rainbow flags and stickers with the mayor and Annapolis Pride members on a dreary day downtown.



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Saturday morning was anything but dreary. The sun beat down on West Street with 94-degree heat and stifling humidity before afternoon storms.

Ward 1 Alderwoman Elly Tierney sported a sparkly yellow wig, waving from a convertible, Del. Heather Bagnall strapped a giant unicorn pool float and balloons to the convertible top of her blue Volkswagon beetle. Ward 6 alderman candidate DaJuan Gay walked with his sign-carrying posse.

"We got a call at the mayor's office yesterday and somebody asked 'Is the mayor a queer?'" Buckley said after the parade. "So I told them to call them back and say 'Yes, the mayor is a big fat queer.'"

He recalled boycotts after his West Street restaurant, Tsunami Sushi, had its first gay night almost two decades ago.

Chants of "Save the Bay" as the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's truck with giant oyster shells and a fishing net towed a rainbow painted canoe with little girls waving rainbow flags.

Members of the Wulin Institute, a Glen Burnie martial arts school, snaked through West Street in a dancing dragon costume and pounded a giant drum. The Naptown Brass Band danced through. St. Anne's Episcopal Church members carried a giant rainbow balloon arch.

All were met with cheers, but when Annapolis Pride members carried out a massive blue, pink and white transgender pride flag, roars erupted.

"I never thought I would see a pride parade in Annapolis," Craig Chase said.

The 50-year-old said he wasn't accepted growing up gay in Severna Park. The 1990s — the AIDS crisis era — were horrific, he said. Saturday, he smiled and celebrated with his partner of 22 years.

Robby Montgomery, 26, cracked jokes and snapped fans with his group of friends, but the day was emotional for him too. Montgomery moved to Washington D.C. two years ago from the home he grew up in Annapolis.

“Pride, for a long time, was something I thought you had to go away to get,” he said.

As students from Annapolis High School carried their banner through the parade, Paul Michaelec, 41, flashed back to being kicked out of the Annapolis High School guidance counselor’s office after coming out.

Michaelec is nonbinary and uses both male and female pronouns. In a flowy red dress and yellow sun hat, Michaelec held a “Nobody knows I’m gay” mug in one hand and, with the other, snapped photos to send to friends who moved away.

“A lot of them moved away because there was nothing here for them,” Michaelec said.

For those still not feeling support and those who wanted to give it, the day was filled with emotional — occasionally wet — hugs.

Women wearing shirts or holding signs reading “Free Mom Hugs” to embrace the neglected at pride events have popped up over the last year or so, along with dads on the same mission. The Maryland chapter of nonprofit “Free Mom Hugs” set up camp in Whitmore Park, but you could get a hug on just about any part of West Street.

Maggie Kennedy bought her “Free Mom Hugs” shirt just for the parade. Even the sweatiest hugs were worth it, she said.

“I think people thought we didn’t have (a pride parade) because people assumed the LGBTQ community is safe here, but in this political climate, I don’t think anyone is safe and we need to show up to support them,” Kennedy said.

Mary Smith, 59, saw Kirsten O’Neill offering free hugs with a sign that said “You are loved!” and decided to join her. She embraced the heat along with anyone who came along.

“Some people are sweaty and it’s okay,” she said. “As the sign says, you are loved as you are — sweaty or not sweaty.”

Washington D.C. residents Jason Hoolse, 43, and Pavel Paul, 27, got hugs from Smith and O’Neill. Paul said his mother doesn’t accept him and they don’t talk about him being gay, so a hug from a mom — even one you don’t know — is powerful.



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Zack Bolin, 25, showed up in drag wearing a flower bikini top and flip-flop skirt with a tiki umbrella twirling above a giant blonde afro sprouting flowers.

After strutting through the parade, Bolin was bombarded with picture requests. Everyone wanted to capture his homemade look, including a woman who noticed Bolin's flower power wedges. She wanted advice on buying shoes for her trans daughter.

"Do they sell those in a size 14?"

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