

Pride celebrations overshadowed by anger over shootings

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Amid the hatred and violence, there is love and hope.

As members of York Region's lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgendered and queer (LGBTQ) community and their supporters struggle this week to absorb the scarring shock of the massacre of 49 people

at a gay nightclub in Orlando early Sunday, they are also speaking of their determination to forge stronger ties of understanding in community.

The shooting by a lone gun-

man at the Pulse nightclub, which left 49 victims dead and another 53 injured in the worst mass shooting in U.S. history, came just before a series of Pride events in York this week, including flag raisings in Vaughan and Georgina, a vigil in Markham and the annual Pride Parade in Richmond Hill.

At Vaughan's flag raising Monday, Amanda Knege, the York Region president of PFLAG Canada, the only national organization that helps Canadians with issues of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, recalled watching the horror of the shooting on her TV.

"It was horrific, it was on the news, it was everywhere. We have these moments in our lives we will always remember where we were. And as a proud gay woman, in Canada, in York Region, to be sitting there with my son, enjoying the liberties that I have in so-called safety, to hear something like that and just the magnitude of it, rocked me to the core," the Richmond Hill resident said.

"Hate exists in groups, it exists in a lot of different sectors. But, for me personally, I would like to believe that kind of hate is the random act of one individual who had obviously suffered from something inside because that kind of act against humanity, against the LGBTQ community, against people in general, it's mind-boggling to think it could be part of something greater," she said.

Knege emotionally described how meaningful it was to proudly raise the Pride flag at Vaughan city hall as 200 people looked on a day after the shooting.

"I'm obviously so upset and saddened and shocked at what happened in Orlando and reeling from that and the emotions from that. To be able to have an event like we had — with strong support from the community and the ability to raise the flag and to show the strength of the community and recognition of the victims and those who survived — it just felt important, it felt right to do something today," she said.

Vaughan Mayor Maurizio Bevilacqua spoke movingly of the love and acceptance he has for his 28-year-old gay son, Jean-Paul.

WEEKEND PARADE

"This is a very important day, as we recognize while many advances in human rights have been achieved, there's a long way to go. I can tell you this personally, as the father of a gay man. The gay community faces many, many challenges," he said.

"I went through it, I went through it personally. There's a lot of confusion I know my son went through during his life. But there is only one way to deal with that, with the power of love, which, I think, is the resource that is required whenever you are dealing with individuals

who are being treated unfairly."

Bevilacqua spoke of sitting in a church and his heart was filled with a sense he had to reach out to his son.

"At that time, I did not know that my son is gay. But I wrote him a text right there in that church and I talked to him about how I was so proud to see parents and children together at that church, children whose parents had actually rejected them, and then at that moment they came together," he said.

VAUGHAN MAYOR'S SON

"I wrote that note to my son and a couple of weeks later, my son came out as a gay man. I don't know where that message came from, but I know I had to reach out to him back then and I did. I'm happy I did because the last thing you want for a human being is to deny who he or she really is, to live the life of a lie, to live a life that is really inconsistent with their very essence as people. There are tens of thousands of people in this region faced with the same challenges. There are many, many reasons why we need to reach out to every single person."

The region's annual Pride Parade, taking place Saturday at 2 p.m. in Richmond Hill, beginning at the intersection of Yonge Street and Crosby Avenue, is usually a day of celebration. This year's event will be overshadowed by the sorrow and anger of the Orlando shooting, York Pride Fest director of development and communications, Jacob Gal, said.

"Everyone is trying to get into the mood, but it's hard to celebrate when so many people have died," he said.

The board of the York Pride Parade participated as a group in this week's vigil in Toronto for the Orlando massacre and used the opportunity to discuss how the weekend's tragedy would change their strategy.

In light of what happened in Florida, board members say they want to re-focus on engaging the community, making their group more visible and increasing dialogue with diverse groups to break down barriers.

"We have queer Muslims in our group and we have to remember that one person does not represent any one group," Gal said.

"We can't be fighting homophobia with Islamophobia."

Gal hopes people will get more involved with Pride and help spread the word about respect, support and comfort.

"Orlando is a big reminder about why we have Pride. Why we need to go below the surface to reach those we don't see on a day-to-day basis," he said, adding as many as 60,000 of the region's 1.1 million residents in York can identify with the LGBTQ community.

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