

BIG IDEAS: Muskoka Pride, and our communities, still have much work to do
by Shawn Forth

Muskoka Pride wrapped up this week. Normally for me it's a week I look forward to all year, to see my community where I grew up proudly flying the rainbow flag along with all municipalities in Muskoka. As a lifelong resident of Muskoka, I'm always so proud to see the communities celebrate gender and sexual diversity (GSD) and inclusion of invisible minorities in our population.

This year felt different. You could ask any of my friends or family, and members of the Muskoka pride board, and they would all tell you that I just didn't seem like myself this year. I was grumpy rather than jubilant, sullen rather than celebratory.

For me it became ever so clear this year that there is still such a long way to go towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) acceptance and inclusion in society.

We heard stories from people about homophobia in the workplace - businesses in the towns and among some of the area's community services.

Students shared comments about homophobic language they hear in hallways in their school, looks of contempt from classmates when holding hands, teachers who won't talk about LGBTQ perspectives or acknowledge preferred pronouns. For me personally this hit me hard, because I'm part of the TLDSB Positive Space committee.

Muskoka Pride, and our communities, have much more work to do.

Some of the most shocking comments were on social media, where you can post almost anonymously and without having to look the person in the eye.

Each year I expect to see the 'usual' comments asking why we don't celebrate "Straight Pride" (just like comments about the need for a "White History Month") the simple answer is that we do that every single day of the year. Hooray for heteronormative privilege!

This year the online comments, and general decorum of those commenting, were much more offensive than I've ever seen. Many had religious objections, however the tone of the language used is insulting and demeaning to individuals who identify as LGBTQ.

Some of the (printable) comments: "Keep all the weirdos and perverts in T.O." "That [rainbow] flag does not represent Canadians or Muskokans and does not belong on a public building." "I don't like acts of depravity being forced in my face." "They have perverted the rainbow."

Is this the Trump effect? Are people feeling suddenly more free to express what's on their mind, no matter whom it hurts?

Thankfully, the comments supporting Muskoka Pride and the LGBTQ community outnumbered the negative comments 5 to 1. But as a gay man reading them, those negative comments seemed to scream out the loudest and hit me the hardest.

I've felt the increased tensions when having challenging conversations or discussions with others lately. People have been quick to anger and take offence at the smallest things. Instead of engaging in respectful dialogue, I'm seeing hurtful and divisive comments that directly target the most marginalized groups of people.

The same thing is happening even within the LGBTQ community. I've seen members of the lesbian and gay community make offensive remarks about bisexual, asexual, and transgender individuals, and queer people of colour and think nothing of it. The LGBTQ community is further dividing itself into smaller segments and creating rifts between what was once a strong rainbow coalition.

We fail as a society when we exclude others. Muskoka Pride strives to celebrate the diversity that exists in Muskoka and be inclusive to everyone.

Sometimes it seems that segments of the LGBTQ community are alienating themselves from their strongest allies and allowing hate to win out. We need to remember one of the hashtags that saw a lot of use in 2015 - #LOVEWINS - and recall the emotions that the marriage equality victory in the U.S. evoked within the community. We need to stop and look at who we are hurting - people just like ourselves.

One of the trends I've noticed in today's youth is to move away from labels and to look instead at the person. It's hard for the older generations, who like having things and people labelled and organized based on differences.

Even for myself, at age 40, I still see the importance of stating that I'm a proud gay man, but maybe we could all learn from today's youth. Perhaps we can move away from labels that divide us and see the person first instead?

We don't always have to agree (in fact respectful debate is very healthy) but if we must disagree can we at least do so agreeably? Posting online with a respectful tone and intentions goes a long way to helping get your point across.

Shawn Forth is on the Muskoka Pride board of directors, and one of the founding members of the organization. He volunteers with several community organizations, including Scouts Canada and Tourette Canada. He is a grade two teacher in Bracebridge.