

LGBTQ youth carve out special spot at Capital Pride Festival

BY NATASCIA LYPNY, OTTAWA CITIZEN AUGUST 17, 2013



Hannah Watt is co-ordinator of Etc., the youth branch of Capital Pride. She notes that there is a fear in youth of not being sure if they will be heard.

Photograph by: Bruno Schlumberger, Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — There's a generational gap in the LGBTQ community, and an emerging organization is making sure youth's interests and issues are well represented in Ottawa's pride events.

Etc., the youth branch of Capital Pride, has come into its own this year as a youth-led organization that is examining and addressing Ottawa's LGBTQ offerings through a young lens.

Once called Capital Pride Youth, the group recently changed its name, a reflection on its growing separation from the larger organization. At the same time, co-ordinator Hannah Watt says Etc. helps to bridge the generational gap by striving to find what Pride can do for young people.

Watt says Capital Pride events have become, for the most part, about celebration. But Etc. members, facing a host of difficulties, still see huge social justice hurdles to overcome.

These obstacles can differ from those of the generations that previously fought for LGBTQ rights. Big

concerns of the past such as gay marriage, which was legalized when teens today were children, have been replaced by things such as the legal red tape trans people face when transitioning, Watt said.

Youth also have a different perspective on who Pride represents, says Erica Butler, Capital Pride's youth marshal this year. She says younger generations have been pushing back on the "commercial" aspects of Pride that have become almost "homo-normative" in their celebration of select gay or lesbian experiences, while ignoring more marginalized groups.

"I think that youth are aware of the fact that the way that a lot of rights have been gained is sort of by portraying sexual or gender minorities as, 'Just like you! Except for this one difference,'" says Butler.

"And people are resisting that idea a bit more, celebrating the idea that there is a lot of diversity ..."

These emerging issues, and youth's take on "pride," has contributed to Etc. becoming much more than an organization that hosts monthly open mics and dances; it has evolved into a veritable community for Ottawa's LGBTQ youth, says Watt.

"I think they have the right to it."

At 18 years old, Watt is the youngest board member to serve as a director with Capital Pride. She says that LGBTQ youth lack some of the same "rights" and power as adults — for instance, many live with their parents and have limitations on how much they can work or earn — and therefore deserve their own carved out space and representation.

"There is a fear in youth of not being sure if they will be heard and respected if they share their voice because people will just shoo them off for being too young," she says.

Watt adds that youth face a particular difficulty with openness about their sexuality given their living situation: Many choose not to come out while still under their parents' roof.

"And some people don't think someone's queerness is as legitimate if they aren't open with it everywhere, if they are closeted in some way or ashamed of it in some way," says Watt.

Her comments fly in the face of the Capital Pride Festival's theme this year of "Be Loud. Be Proud." (The 10-day festival opened Friday.)

This desire or need for some youth to stay "closeted" was also an inspiration for Etc.'s name change.

The group found its new name when a volunteer rattled off the LGBTQ acronym and finished it with "etc." The name helps youth be honest with their parents as to what they are participating in without having to blatantly label it a pride organization, explains Watt. The change takes out the need for lying or for potentially outing oneself, she says.

Butler commends Etc. on its evolution, saying its progress "has really been received well within the community." Through her work as a women's and gender studies student at Carleton University and a

Youth Services Bureau program for LGBTQ youth, she has seen a great need for youth-specific spaces and events within the community.

But she wouldn't push the significance of Pride — a “milestone” for some younger people, she says — to the side.

“For a lot of people, it's the one time in the year that maybe they feel comfortable being more open about their sexuality or gender identity. That's consistent generationally,” she says.

So far, Etc. has hosted an open mic and a gender blender party. Next week will feature an outdoor DIY day and the much anticipated Pride Prom.

And on Aug. 25, as Capital Pride treks down its old parade haunt of Bank Street for the first time in nearly a decade, Etc. will no longer be watching from a sideline tent. It will march in the parade for the first time as its own group, proudly holding the Etc. banner.

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