

SMALL TOWN PRIDE



Photography by Meg Froehler

A hallmark of life in small towns and cities is the sense of community pride. Whether it's coming together to support those in need, raising funds for special projects, or cheering on local teams, folks come together to make things better for others by building connections, fostering inclusion and, indeed, showing even more, pride.

Ironic, though it may seem, this sense of inclusivity has not always been extended at home for local LGBTQ2S+ community members.

Thankfully, this is changing as smaller towns and cities build capacity and recognition of the importance and value of inclusion and diversity as foundational pillars of community wellbeing.

SETTING THE STAGE

For Salmon Arm, a community of 20,000 in BC's Shuswap region, this work has begun. The highlight of the third annual Salmon Arm Pride Project's was the Loud & Proud celebration this past October. The annual celebration, having learned and built community capacity the prior two years through careful planning, engagement and training, was ready, willing and able to further amplify the celebration of local pride.

In early 2022, the local committee teamed up with other community groups to plan an outdoor concert, in a public downtown venue, to kick off the Pride Project, in a big, bold way.



"Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance." *Author Verna Myers*

"...to power change through the visual, performing and literary arts, offers a positive space to start conversation, explore understanding, and celebrate"

Under the artistic direction of Nathan Fdear, who started his career in dance and the arts in Salmon Arm, community leaders formed a planning team and eagerly set to work on what a big Pride Project event could look like in Salmon Arm. Led by the Salmon Arm Arts Centre, the planning team included the City of Salmon Arm, the Salmon Arm Folk Music Society, Downtown Salmon Arm and the Salmon Arm Economic Development Society. This team organized an ambitious celebration on October 15, 2022 transforming an intersection of the downtown shopping district into a full-blown music festival with six hours of live entertainment, a Pride shop, a food truck space, a dance floor complete with DJ.

The event was an unrivalled success, the weather, a stunningly warm and sunny autumn beauty, welcoming families, friends and visitors from near and far. Over 600 guests marvelled at the music, the hospitality, the food and vendors, the lights and the sounds of the spectacle. People, literally, dancing in the street with, and for, pride. The community, invited to attend this free, all ages event, showed up and did, indeed, dance.

THE RAINBOW EFFECT

The sheer transformation of a familiar public space into a world of welcome, joy and inclusion to celebrate the Pride Project has what can only be called a rainbow effect casting its light far after the sun goes down and the twinkle lights sparkle. In the days following, the Pride Project events following the Loud & Proud Celebration showed attendance was off the charts, concluding in a sold out all ages drag brunch at the local concert hall. It wrapped up as it had started with great music, great food and great company.



The approach used here, to power change through the visual, performing and literary arts, offers a positive space to start conversation, explore understanding and celebrate. It has been key to the success of the Pride Project. It will continue to inform and lead future plans and events.

But the story doesn't end there. In the weeks and months since, there are countless tales told of chats in the barber chair, the shop floor, the office lunchroom, the knitting circle, the local coffee shop, the neighbourhood pub, the symbols of pride finding permanent places in store windows, office doors and classrooms. It was through the generosity of local sponsors who came forward and proudly made all the Pride Project events possible that the conversations continue.

We're learning, we're sharing, we're supporting and we are trying to be better. Improving, building more understanding, more opportunities to gather, and more acceptance of community where, when love is love, eventually, it wins. Loud & Proud amplified that message. And as the organizers quietly whisper it's time to start planning for 2023, make no mistake, Salmon Arm has found a voice and it won't be the last we hear from them.

Small communities can make a big difference in the lives of marginalized populations. It's really just a matter of pride.