

Interview with Harrogate Pride in Diversity Committee, 04/03/20

P: Do you want to start?

L: Okay yeah. My name's Leonara Wassell, I'm Chair of Pride in Diversity. I brought in our first-year souvenir as the artefact to remember that we actually achieved this four years ago. Just three of us got together. I had been to pride in York, and in Leeds, and at 60 I'd never been part of the scene before I started going to Leeds. And I thought "well now I live in Harrogate", and I met somebody, Steve, and he said "Oh I live in Harrogate", so we met together. We had a coffee, and "oh why don't we do one in Harrogate". "Yes, why not."

And then sadly the young people who were murdered in Orlando struck me, as a priest. Nothing was being done in the church, in Harrogate anyway, to have a vigil, there were lots of secular vigils but... So I opened up Wesley Chapel in Harrogate Town Centre for people to come in and Poppy came in and said, "Can I do a PowerPoint presentation?", so she did. And so we stayed open all afternoon, and I told her what I'd hoped to do.

So Steve, Poppy and I got together and started planning. And we went to various places who said "oh dear no no no, that'll never happen". And we're very passionate about this, and what drove me was the LGBT community are waiting to be accepted and tolerated by society and the church. I thought let's turn it on its head. Let the LGBT community, show what it's like to be totally inclusive.

So there we were, a gay man, a lesbian woman and a straight woman, putting this event on. And it was exciting, hair-raising. But I think, because we hadn't done it before, I felt, "well I'm too stupid to realise it's too much, and too bloody minded to give in to the fear". So if you want to say something Poppy.

P: Yeah, so we really didn't know what we were doing. We still don't, but we're very good at pretending now. But it was a real work in progress, and it still is, we're still working and learning. But over three years people have really started to realise that, well, a. we're not going anywhere, whether they engage with us or not it's gonna happen.

But also, we've stopped having to chase people. So for the first year and a half maybe, we were constantly, like Lee says, asking for people to accept us, asking for them to help us, to support us, to join us. And then after the, maybe the second year, suddenly we started getting emails from people who were like "we want to meet you, we want to come and have a stall, we want to get involved, we want you to come to us and help us learn and grow". And that was really amazing because finally they were coming to us and asking us, and I think that's really important.

And, don't get me wrong, there were still people who think that we are, it's not necessary. And still people who won't engage with us. And I would say, because I'm a person of faith that I won't stop until the churches will acknowledge us. Because in Harrogate that's a big deal. There are a lot of churches. And so far, they are very reticent, sometimes even downright rude about being involved with us.

But actually, I would say that we have come to a place where unlike three years ago, where we felt disheartened when people said, "No, we don't want to be involved with you", we're now in a place where we can say to people who we don't think fit our ethos, "no we don't want to be involved with you". And I think that's a really amazing place to be at, that we are calling the shots now, instead of waiting for others to tell us things.

L: Yeah, the first year we had, because this is a conference town, we thought we'd have a festival. So we did for five nights, the Crown gave us their ballroom, their biggest room, free. And so the idea was diversity in sport, diversity in art and literature, so we had something on each of those. And, we got 20 people coming.

But that's because it was the first year, but it took so much out of us we decided not to do that again. And we put it all in on the day in the valley gardens and having, make it into a village. And we're coming a bit round now to make it into a festival, to having it over the whole of the month.

But as Poppy said people are now engaging with us. And in the newspaper, just a few weeks ago, it had '13 new things that have happened in Harrogate over the last decade', and we were number 13, and it's now considered a major festival in Harrogate, which is great considering this is only our fourth year.

But it took a while because those in the LGBT community thought it's not a proper pride. It's not gay enough, although we had five drag queens, a 50-metre rainbow flag. But obviously, it wasn't because they were disabled people, they were other minorities there, but as I said we wanted to stand together. And so our tagline became 'dignity, respect and inclusion'. So that's what, and we want all, so anyone can join. The children said "can I go? Because I'm not gay". I said 80% of those who go to Pride in Diversity are straight. So anyone can come, and so yes, the fact that historically now this will be mapped for us has heartened me.

P: And I think as well that now we're in that place of that we're now looking about how do we make things bigger and better, instead of just, like, carrying on. And that means that we now, I mean, don't get me wrong the museum's always been really supportive of us, but we're now getting more respect from, you know. Harrogate is a hard place to infiltrate. It's a very, it's a bubble. The Harrogate bubble is a real thing. And it can be hard to get into those well-known institutions within the town. For example, here the museums are part of the town or Betty's, for example, is an institution that we worked really hard to work in partnership with.

L: But won't.

P: But we can't get there, because they are a part of the institution of the town, and we are still new. But, the institutions that have welcomed us and have really taken on working in partnership have really taken it on. Like they've gone from like one extreme to the other. Like I mean, this opportunity to be, to talk with you has really been led by the museum.

And also, things like Harrogate Theatre, which is a really respected part of Harrogate, now runs a number of productions around LGBT issues and makes it clear that they're doing it in partnership with us. So, last year during the run up to pride they had like a good week of plays...

L: It was a festival.

P: that were purely LGBT focused and they had publicity and big banners and I mean stuff that we as a small pride, don't have the resources to have. They were doing it in our name which is incredible.

L: Well we have to say, I think that's what's changed is that Porl, who is one of the managers there is gay. That helps. The hospital, CEO is. The

hospital have always been behind us. But since, Steve has come along, again, he's taken it to the next level. We feel now that we've done this three years, we're now moving to the next level. So we're looking at having to become a charity, getting a CEO, and from just three of us.

P: Yeah.

L: And the very unpolitical way we used to get together and laugh and joke. This is now serious. We are becoming a tool, a political. We just gained the funding to allow this, with hate crime. And the story and the work that you're doing, which again is very heartening.

P: And also, I think, like I said that Harrogate does have a bubble, and that people who are LGBT live in Harrogate, we know they do. They live everywhere. Of course they live in Harrogate. But Harrogate is a place where it's almost told to people "oh, it doesn't matter". Or a lot of people live their exciting going out to gay bars and doing that, away from Harrogate, because Harrogate is a child and a middle age demographic. There's very little people in the middle, and so people usually get to university, leave Harrogate, and don't come back until they have their own family and they're settled.

And so then beat their sexuality as lack of excitement, or a big deal and so they just carry on with their life, and which is fabulous that they feel comfortable to do that. But it means that they don't feel the need to shout it, and celebrate it.

And I think that's what we're almost allowing people to do, is to celebrate it of like, yes, you might just be living your day-to-day life with your husband and your adopted, incredible family, but actually no you deserve the right to celebrate. Your life might be amazing, but ten to one it wasn't easy for you to get there. So let's celebrate it, let's bring joy and let, you know, and I know people say it's a funny thing having young people at pride sometimes, but actually let children see you. Let 5, 6, 7-year-old children see that having two dads is not a big deal, or wanting to marry another woman is not a big deal. And I think that's really important.

And I think that's why people like the manager at the theatre, and the CEO of the hospital are so important, because actually probably five years ago, nobody would have known that they were gay, not because they didn't come out, because it would have been like, well, doesn't really matter, to to say that I am, because it's not my job. Whereas now it's okay, they're ready to celebrate that fact, and they want to bring it into their job as well. So I think that's really important. And I feel like we've really enabled people to want to do that.

L: I mean it's not easy being trail blazers. My point was that I don't care what people think anymore. But what the feedback that we get is that people look forward to this now, because to see, it's the atmosphere of acceptance and happiness, and you've got, you can see heterosexual couples with their children, all rainbowed-up. They've come to celebrate with us and stand as allies. And it is a day of celebration, but it's also by that a campaign to say it's all right to be who you are and accepting.

And the first year, there was an interview with a little boy, 10, was it Matthew his name. But anyway, he said. It's all right, to be who you are. We're all the same, on the inside, yeah. And so that's carrying on.

P: And I think that's where I would say that my place is in it, so before pride, doing pride here, I'd never been to pride and, and I'd never really felt the need to go. And like I was telling somebody the other day, like, I never felt the need to go because in my head, it wasn't for me. It's not my space, I don't deserve to occupy that space, because it's made for people... like pride was a protest, it was to make people realise that we are here, and we're not going anywhere, and it's okay. And so I always thought, well, that's not for me.

But actually, my place in this all I've always felt is, I have never faced those things, that I am celebrating people who have. And I am in a really unique position that my life has been pretty easy, I would say, and my sexuality has never made it more difficult. So my job is not to occupy that space, it's to make that space.

So I have never done pride because I want to party, which can be easy to do, because the day, actual day is the most stressful day of my life. Because coordinating so many people is just so difficult. But actually, I'm not there to have a good time, I mean I do, don't get me wrong, but I'm there to make other people feel like this is their time, this is their space, and I will fight to the death to make sure that that space is reserved for people to celebrate themselves and who they are and who they love. Because that's so important, I think.

L: I mean we feel that we're facilitators. On that very first pride evening, we had an after party at the Vipers. Half past ten, I was absolutely shattered, like I need to go home. But just so I went to go out the door, and in Methodist terms, my heart was strangely warmed. I allowed myself just a moment of pride. Because there were all these young people dancing, and old ones, but the place was packed of young LGBT people out, and proud. And I'd made that happen. So I allowed myself just a moment of pride, and it was afterwards.

P: I didn't even make it to then! I went home at like half two, I was shattered! But I think if we, the most powerful image, for me, is every year, and it never fails, is being on the top of the double decker bus, and looking back. So we have a double decker bus leads our parade, and as you look back over the back you can see the flag, and all the people following it. And even in that first year, to me, there looked thousands, I mean there weren't...

L: but there were a lot, considering it was our first one.

P: Yeah! But we thought there'd be about twenty people. That's what I was like, if we get, you know, 50 we're doing well. But there was so many people, and every year since the crowds have increased haven't they? And it's just, it's just mind blowing.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai> and Lydia Kingston