

Good morning, My name is David Belrose. I'm a community outreach worker with Rainbow Health Ontario, a province-wide program aimed at improving access to services and promoting the health of LGBT communities. I've also been part of this community for most of my life. I want to shift focus and cover some different territory, in particular offering some historical context.

A few words about acronyms. We hear the terms LGBT, GLBT, LGBTQ, LGBTTTTIQQ etc. [referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirit, intersex, queer, questioning]. To simplify things I will use LGBT myself (with the view that it encompasses the full range of sexual minorities).

I also want to say something about the rainbow flag, sometimes called 'the freedom flag', which was created as a symbol of LGBT pride and diversity by San Francisco artist Gilbert Baker in 1978. After some changes, it now consists of six coloured stripes which should always be displayed with red on top or to left. The different colors symbolize diversity in the gay community, each colour having symbolic meaning: red (life) orange (healing) yellow (sunlight) green (nature) blue (serenity/harmony) purple/violet (spirit).

This week is the first ever city-wide Pride event in Thunder Bay, and the flag raising at City Hall last Tuesday was a deep emotional experience. It has been an interesting half century. In the early sixties, when I came into awareness of my orientation as a gay man, it was a criminal offense, punishable by up to seven years in prison, for me to express my love for

another man. Most religious teaching was condemnatory, and we were usually consigned to an “eternity in hell” as a result of our orientation. Medically, homosexuality was considered a mental or psychological illness. We could be fired from a job, or not hired in the first place, refused accommodation, bullied, harassed, and gay-bashed without recourse. The literature available was usually appallingly bad science. (Alfred Kinsey, Evelyn Hooker were notable exceptions.)

In 1969, acts in private between consenting adults 21 and over were removed from the Criminal Code,

In 1973, homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders by the American Psychiatric Association.

In 1977, Quebec amended its human rights code to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, though it took Ontario until 1986 to do the same. The equality-rights guarantees in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms came into effect in 1985, and this slowly began to change the legal landscape.

It took another decade^{two} before same-sex marriage became legal across Canada. And finally, this year Thunder Bay is celebrating Pride.

I'll quote from a recent Facebook posting:

It's about time the GLBT community had a more visible presence in my old hometown! Hopefully the development of the GLBT community will encourage more people to stay in the Bay rather than leaving to find a community that more openly accepts them!

We have come a long way legally, and even socially. However there is still a long way yet to go. Young LGBT people commit suicide or go face suicidal ideation at much higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts.

People still fear they will be fired or will not be hired if their sexual orientation is known. Bullying and harassment is still prevalent in schools and in public venues. Transgender people are at the greatest risk for all of the above. Some religions still condemn LGBT minorities and can poison public discourse.

Over the years a number of efforts have been made to counter the effects of homophobia and heterosexism. I spoke earlier of some of the legal changes. Here in Thunder Bay, LDSB has made significant changes, there are GSAs in high schools, and they are part of this Pride Week. SAGE, the Sexuality and Gender Equity working group has brought agencies together to work on improving access to services. Most recently the Community LGBTQ Resources Directory of service providers who commit to offering a safe welcoming space and competent care was officially launched. In the past year, Creating Safe Spaces Training has given providers new insights and tools to make their services more culturally competent.

So in terms of working to make things better, I think our report card is mixed. Huge advances have been made, and yet a great deal more still needs to be done. We need to maintain constant vigilance to protect existing rights and prevent rollbacks (which may work for WalMart, but would be destructive of the compassionate, just and equitable society which I would hope we are all working toward).

Let us enjoy this week of celebrating together, but let us never lose sight of the ongoing need for attention to social justice, and let us work to continue building a community that celebrates rather than just tolerates diversity, and where justice, equity and compassion govern our human relations.

I will close with these words of John Cummins:

“May we never rest until every child of earth in every generation is free from all prisons of the mind and of the body and of the spirit; until the earth and the hills and the seas shall dance, and the universe itself resounds with the joyful cry: "Behold! I am!"