

# CENTENNIAL PLAZA

Location 9924 101A Avenue #9904



[www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca](http://www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca)



When most people think of a Pride Festival, the image that comes to mind is of a lengthy parade filled with colourful floats riding down a street lined with tens of thousands of spectators. This has undoubtedly been the case for many of Edmonton's Pride celebrations over the past thirty-plus years, but there was a time when how we celebrated Pride looked very different.

In 1989, Centennial Plaza became the site of "the first openly gay rally [held] in Edmonton in eight years or more."<sup>1</sup> This was the culmination of two weeks of events organized throughout the city to promote gay and lesbian awareness after several months of debate within City Council, and in the local media, as to whether there was a need to formally recognize a "Gay and Lesbian Awareness Day" in Edmonton.

The year 1989 was, of course, not the first year Pride events were held in Edmonton. Even before the 1981 police raid of the Pisces Health Spa, local LGBTQ2 venues and groups such as GATE and Dignity had celebrated Pride with various activities, which were often held at Camp Harris, located just west of the city. These events usually occurred quietly inside the local LGBTQ2 community, without much fanfare or mainstream media attention. After the 1981 raid, a media spotlight began to grow and follow gay and lesbian community advocates who were fighting back against oppression and advocating for equal rights in all aspects of society.

In 1982, several community groups (including GATE, Dignity, Roughnecks, Flashback, and the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose) came together to organize a more public weekend of events in what is considered Edmonton's "first" organized Pride celebration. In the early years of Pride, events often centred around arts, film, sports, music, and picnics that were primarily aimed at the LGBTQ2 community. One featured Pride event included a benefit concert by comedian Robin Tyler, who quipped about her upcoming show that "people don't have to be gay to come on Sunday night... they just have to be happy."<sup>2</sup> During that first Pride weekend, an estimated 500 people participated in a variety of events organized around the theme of "gay pride through unity."

Activists noted how this "unity weekend" created an important sense of community and fostered a feeling of gay pride.<sup>3</sup> The following year, Scott

McConnell, an organizer of the 1983 festival, noted how the Pride festival was also a "chance to work with the straight community and become more unified."<sup>4</sup> Kathy Baker, the organizer of a pride-themed film night, hoped the week would show how gays and lesbians have similar community and social needs, and that it would help break down some of the stereotypes associated with gay and lesbian people.

By 1984, community advocates had created a new group separate from GATE, with a more explicit focus on supporting community visibility and engaging in political advocacy. This group was called Gay and Lesbian Awareness (GALA), and they would spearhead Edmonton's LGBTQ2 Pride festivities for the next decade and beyond.

The creation of GALA added a greater political emphasis to Pride 1984 and subsequent festivals. Immediately, the new organization began to petition City Hall for official recognition. Councillor Ed Ewasjuk was in favour of declaring Wednesday, June 27, 1984, as "Gay and Lesbian Awareness Day," but other city councillors, and Mayor Laurence Decore, were bluntly opposed. The year's



<sup>1</sup> "Silly Six Proclaim a Gay Day Anyway," *Edmonton Journal*, June 28, 1986, B4.

<sup>2</sup> Lois Sweet, "Comic's Humour is Radical and Outrageous," *Edmonton Journal*, June 11, 1982, A6.

<sup>3</sup> "Gay Pride 82: Plain Old Intoxicating Fun," *The Body Politic*, September 1982, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ron Chalmers, "Gays and Lesbians Stage Pride Week," *Edmonton Journal*, June 22, 1983, D9.

festivities proceeded regardless, with an afternoon of events at Rundle Park that included a children's concert and an ecumenical service and a dance to end the week.<sup>5</sup> GALA's 1985 proclamation request was also rejected, with one person stating that Mayor Decore's ongoing unwillingness to proclaim the day is like saying, "endorsing them is like endorsing leprosy."<sup>6</sup>

One of the major events of the 1985 festival was a screening of the Oscar-winning film *The Times of Harvey Milk*. This documentary highlighted the life of San Francisco's first openly gay elected official and premiered at the Princess Theatre as part of GALA's Pride week programming, which also included a jazz night, a chorus night with Edmonton Vocal Minority, a wine and cheese social with Womospace, and a barbecue and dance with GATE.<sup>7</sup> However, the packed calendar of community events didn't have any impact on City Hall; the 1985 Pride proclamation request was once again rejected.

By 1989, little progress had been made in GALA's attempts to secure an official Pride proclamation from the City. When the 1989 request was rejected once more, GALA's response was to satirically host an "Edmontonchuk Silly Council" meeting and issue their own mock proclamation<sup>8</sup>. Two provincial government NDP opposition members joined local performers in staging the entertaining protest, which included a drag performer and a lampooning of Councillor Julian Kinisky, who had made news headlines by declaring he would move to Australia if City Council granted the request for a gay day.<sup>9</sup> Slowly, more council members had begun to speak in favour of recognizing Gay and Lesbian Awareness Day, including Councillor Jan Reimer and Brian Mason, who was president of the Edmonton Voter's Association. That same year, British



Columbia MP Svend Robinson, Canada's very first publicly "out" Member of Parliament, travelled to Edmonton to join in the Pride week celebrations, which included helping to open Edmonton's new gay and lesbian community centre. Pride '89 also featured a session entitled "Racism, Racial Difference

and Identity", which was described as a workshop for people of colour, mixed ancestry, and white allies.

Forward momentum continued to build. Only a few months after Pride '89, Jan Reimer was elected Mayor. For the first time, Edmonton's LGBTQ2 community had a strong ally in the Mayor's Office, and when it came time for the 1990 Pride festival, she was on hand to participate, along with Glen Murray, who was a recently elected out gay alderman from Winnipeg. In addition to GALA, prominent community groups like the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose and the Gay and Lesbian Community Centre of Edmonton (GLCCE) played essential roles in the year's festivities, including co-sponsoring the community dance that ended the week.

One key feature was still missing from Pride—the parade. In the early 1990s, GALA decided it was time to address that critical absence. This required relocating out of downtown, and a new home for the Pride festival was found along Whyte Avenue at McIntyre Park. Edmonton's first official Pride parade featured a short route, which included two blocks on Whyte Avenue. The parade featured about 30 participants, some of whom wore paper bags over their heads to hide their identities. The Pride parade was led by Michael Phair and Maureen Irwin, who also did most of the organizing and clean-up.

In 1992, MP Svend Robinson returned to speak to the assembled Pride festival crowd, which had had their growing excitement somewhat deflated by a blindside from City Hall. Although City Council had finally agreed to formally proclaim a Gay Pride Day, the motion required "sign off" from the Mayor, who was away on vacation. The responsibility for signing the proclamation was left to acting Mayor Sheila McKay, who refused.<sup>10</sup> This didn't stop the celebration, though. Not even recent incidents of gay-bashing or homophobic hecklers along the parade route could dampen the community's enthusiasm, which was heightened by Michael Phair's recent announcement to run for City Council. GALA reps were thrilled with the turnout for the 1992 parade, which they estimated at around 200 people. With both increasing visibility and vocal resistance from protestors<sup>11</sup>, the Edmonton Police Service was invited to future parades to help direct traffic and to provide protection along the parade route.

Parade attendance continued to build, bolstered in 1993 by the first official Pride proclamation from City Hall. Mayor Jan Reimer had attended previously, but this year, her participation was accompanied by a special message: every person should be treated with dignity and respect, and the City of Edmonton would recognize that "gays and lesbians exist in this city". The year's theme was "A Family of Pride", and the proclamation was met with mixed reviews from Edmontonians. Some citizens claimed that City Council had no business "endorsing such a lifestyle,"<sup>12</sup> while newly elected City Alderman Michael Phair countered by stating that gays and lesbians are "a vital part of the city."<sup>13</sup>

5 Chris Zdeb, "Gay-Day Unlikely to Win City Blessing," *Edmonton Journal*, June 8, 1984, B2.

6 R. C. Jorgenson, "Do Autos Get Precedence Over People?" [Opinion], *Edmonton Journal*, March 5, 1985, A7.

7 "Coming Together," *The Body Politic*, June 1985, 5.

8 "Silly Six," B4.

9 Lynda Shorten, "Gay Day Would Drive Kinisky Down Under," *Edmonton Journal*, May 10, 1989, A1.

10 Stephen Erwin, "Gays Parade with Pride; Big Turnout Pleases Organizers," *Edmonton Journal*, June 28, 1992, B1.

11 Student-lead initiatives brought additional visibility with two three-day LGBTQ2 film festivals in March of 1992 and 1993 to coincide with University Pride Week celebrations. Michelle Lavoie, working through Gays and Lesbian on Campus (GALOC), and supported by the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) and Latitude 53 Gallery, curated *The Voice and Vision* (1992) and *Speaking in Tongues* (1993). Both festivals found huge support, with Edmonton's LGBTQ2 community filling theatres to capacity each night. *The Voice and Vision* premiered John Greyson's controversial film about gay bashing, *The Making of Monsters*; Edmonton's premiere closely followed the film's debuts at the Berlin International Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, and in Vancouver's *Out on Film* and Montreal's *Image+Nation*, see: [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Making\\_of\\_Monsters](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Making_of_Monsters). For more see: Bob Remington, "Film Festival Gives Voice to Gays," *Edmonton Journal*, March 10, 1992, B6; Marc Horton, "Gay, Lesbian Film Festival Out to Educate: If People are Open We're Here... and Yes Diane Mirosh is Invited," *Edmonton Journal*, March 18, 1993, D3.

12 "Mayor's Gay Day Proclamation Has Edmontonians in a Tizzy," *Edmonton Journal*, June 8, 1993, B1.

13 Marta Gold, "Reimer's Gay-Day Proclamation Criticized," *Edmonton Journal*, May 27, 1993, A1.

Pride festivities on Whyte Avenue continued to grow, despite the 1995 mayoral election, which saw Bill Smith win. With Jan's defeat, the LGBTQ2 community lost an important ally. Mayor Bill Smith proceeded to refuse any and all requests for a Pride proclamation, which would continue for almost the entirety of his tenure as Mayor. It seemed like progress was moving backwards until the threat of a human rights complaint was issued in 2003 by the Edmonton Pride Week Society, and with mounting pressure from community leaders such as Murray Billett, Mayor Bill Smith was finally compelled to proclaim Gay and Lesbian Awareness Day, despite his ongoing personal and religious objections. In response to the Pride proclamation finally being issued after many years of the Mayor's steadfast refusal, local drag queen Kitten Kaboodle (Scott Campbell) highlighted the significance of the proclamation by stating, "It gives us the sense we're part of the community and not ostracized."<sup>14</sup>

Pride returned to the heart of the city in 1998, when GALA changed the date of celebrations from June to the May long weekend to coincide with the Canadian GALA Choruses Festival. Chorus festival participants help bolster the number of Pride attendees to new records. However, the parade was cancelled due to a lack of funding.<sup>15</sup> This was a time long before corporate sponsorships, and GALA had no way to pay for the rising costs associated with the Pride parade, which included increasing security requirements, closing city streets, and erecting barricades. Instead of a parade, a Pride rally was held in Churchill

Square, echoing Pride events from years earlier that had taken place just a block south at Centennial Plaza. Hosting the Pride rally right outside of City Hall was both symbolic and significant.

Mayor Smith's ongoing refusal to proclaim Pride Day didn't change after Delwin Vriend's 1998 Supreme Court victory. Edmonton's community was growing less willing to accept this blatant homophobia. Pride 1999 started with a march to City Hall as Edmonton's LGBTQ2 community proclaimed the week for themselves.<sup>16</sup> This year also saw the Pride parade return, this time beginning at Grant Notley Park. The parade would stay north of the river until 2015, even though the various routes would change. Initially walking down 100 Avenue, the parade soon was marching down Jasper Avenue, first heading west and ending in Oliver Park, and after 2004, heading east to finish in Churchill Square in the footsteps of City Hall.

First in Oliver Park, then at Churchill Square, and still later at End of Rail Park, Edmonton Pride parades often ended with colourful entertainment, beer gardens, and business and community fairs. These events were usually held in partnership with support from local community groups like the ISCWR, Northern Chaps, Edmonton Rainbow Business Association, Dignity, MCC, and several public sector unions. In the late 1990s, GALA itself had dissolved, and its Pride planning branch transformed into the newly established Edmonton Pride Festival Society (EPFS). While GALA had also been a political advocacy group, EPFS had as its sole mandate the production and promotion of the Pride Festival.

With the start of the new millennium, the roots of Edmonton's Pride Festival were firmly established, and it would continue to grow and flourish each year. Also growing was political support from all levels of government. Stephen Mandel was the first city Mayor to formally participate in the Pride parade and would do so for many years. Edmonton Centre Member of Parliament and Federal Justice Minister Anne McLellan joined the Pride festivities in 2001 and marched in the parade with a colourful rainbow umbrella.<sup>17</sup> Just over a decade later, in 2012, Alison Redford would become the first sitting Premier to attend Pride.<sup>18</sup> Redford also became the first Premier in Alberta's history to raise the rainbow pride flag over the Alberta Legislature as part of world-wide protests against the Sochi Olympics being held in Russia and its anti-LGBTQ2 human rights abuses<sup>19</sup>. In 2015, then federal Liberal leader and future Prime Minister Justin Trudeau marched in Edmonton's parade alongside Premier Rachel Notley, who had long been an ally of the LGBTQ2 community.<sup>20</sup> Another milestone occurred when the Edmonton Oiler's team captain, Andrew Ference, became the first Oiler hockey player, and first team captain of any major professional team sport in North America, to march in a Pride parade.<sup>21</sup>

By the end of the 1990s, participation in the Pride parades had broken the 10,000-attendance mark. The early 2000s saw the Pride parade continue to grow by leaps and bounds, with attendance quickly doubling and then tripling as public support for the LGBTQ2 community increased. This rapid growth

**A week of  
GAY AND LESBIAN AWARENESS**

**JUNE 24-29** *Gala 04*

**THURSDAY, JUNE 21**  
LESBIAN DROP-IN  
WINE AND CHEESE

Courtesy of Womanspace, 7 to 9 p.m. at 9926 112 St. (Every Woman's Place) Call Lesbian Info Line at 488-2918 for information. Admission is free.

**SATURDAY, JUNE 23**  
G.A.T.E. OPEN HOUSE

Every night till June 29 (Sunday 2 to 5 p.m.) Gay Alliance Toward Equality is open 7 to 10 p.m. Admission is free. A good opportunity to get (re)acquainted with G.A.T.E. at 10173 104 St. Information: 424-8361.

**SUNDAY, JUNE 24**  
G.A.L.A. Picnic

The GALA '84 picnic takes place at Rundle Park picnic area #1, from noon to 9 p.m. Come to the Park (2909 113 Ave.) by turning right at 118 Ave. and 31 St., or by buses #20

or #28 from the Coliseum LRT. The picnic will tentatively be kicked off by a 5-km fun-run around the park at 11 a.m.

**Schedule of Events:**

12:00 noon: Siamese Soccer  
1:00 p.m.: Volleyball  
2:00 p.m.: Softball  
2:30 p.m.: Relay Races (1/2 hour)  
3:00 p.m.: Children's Concert (children only please)  
4:00 p.m.: Tug-o-War  
5:30 p.m.: Ecumenical Service (musicians needed)  
7:00 p.m.: Sing-a-long  
9:00 p.m.: The End

Jugglers, scrobbats, dancers, musicians, any-and-all, various-and-sundry outdoor performers are welcome.

Refreshments will be available. Bring a picnic lunch or supper.

More information may be obtained by calling any of the sponsors of the picnic:  
469-4286: Dignity  
439-7777: M.C.C./Roughnecks  
488-2918: Womanspace

14 Mairi MacLean, "Mood Upbeat at Gay Pride Thanks to Ruling," Edmonton Journal, June 16, 2003, B1.

15 "Prairie Pride," Perceptions Magazine, June 10, 1998.

16 "Gay Pride Marches On," Edmonton Journal, June 12, 1999.

17 Andy Ogle, "City Pride Parade Marks Gains by Gays and Lesbians," Edmonton Journal, June 17, 2001, B1.

18 Angelique Rodrigues, "Redford to Take Part in Edmonton Gay Pride Fest," Edmonton Sun, June 2, 2012, <https://edmontonjournal.com/2012/06/02/redford-to-take-part-in-edmonton-gay-pride-fest>.

19 Patricia Kozicka, "City of Edmonton, Alberta Legislature Raise Pride Flags for Duration of Sochi Olympics," Global News, February 7, 2014, <https://globalnews.ca/news/1135739/city-of-edmonton-raises-rainbow-flag-for-duration-of-sochi-olympics/>.

20 "Premier Notley, Justin Trudeau at Edmonton Pride Parade," CBC News, June 6, 2015, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/premier-rachel-notley-justin-trudeau-at-edmonton-pride-parade-1.3103411>.

21 John MacKinnon, "Socially Aware Captain Andrew Ference Becomes First Oiler to March in Edmonton Pride Parade," Edmonton Journal, June 3, 2014, <https://edmontonjournal.com/sports/socially-aware-captain-andrew-ference-becomes-first-oiler-to-march-in-edmonton-pride-parade>.

led to the need for new events focused on family, with a growing number of visible and vocal LGBTQ2 parents and a lot more “out and proud” LGBTQ2 children and youth now participating. Other new events included the annual Mayor’s Pride Brunch, which began at the Norwood Royal Canadian Legion hall and grew into a fundraiser for Camp fyrefly. Another highlight was the newly established Edmonton Pride Run & Walk, which started in 2015 to help raise funds to support student bursaries at the University of Alberta, which to date has raised more than \$50,000.

2015 also marked the 35th anniversary of Edmonton’s Pride Festival,<sup>22</sup> which included the official launch of the Edmonton Queer History Project and a specially curated exhibition at the Art Gallery of Alberta.<sup>23</sup> Rising popularity and growth also helped the EPFS work with other festivals in Edmonton, such as K-Days where they hosted a unique Pride Socks fundraiser and held a special Pride Day. For the first time, Edmonton’s Fringe Festival also participated in the 2017 Pride Parade.<sup>24</sup> Pride was seemingly celebrated everywhere in Edmonton, including from the Legislature grounds to the suburbs.

However, with growth and rising corporate involvement came increasing critique, which was not unique to just Edmonton. The meaning of “pride” was increasingly called into question, with voices speaking out against military and police participation, increasing corporate sponsorship, and the lack of visibility and representation of Two Spirit, trans, and racialized communities. A 2015 attempt to incorporate a Women and Trans Festival and March as part of the Pride festival was initially successful, but that success could not be duplicated in subsequent years<sup>25</sup>.

The presence of the Edmonton Police Service had long been a part of Pride festival activities, including providing security, directing traffic, and even participating in the parade and hosting events such as the Edmonton Police Chief’s Pride Reception. Likewise, the Canadian Armed Forces had also been represented in the Pride parade, and in 2013 raised the pride flag at their Namao base, marking the first time this had happened at any military base in Canada.<sup>26</sup>

In 2018, concerns over the ongoing presence of police and military resulted in the Pride parade, now back in Old Strathcona, being disrupted by a protest. Similar protests had been occurring at Pride events across North America. In 2016, Black Lives Matter in Toronto stopped the Pride parade, demanding an end to police participation as a result of ongoing mistreatment of Black and racialized communities and called for greater representation of Black, Indigenous, and trans voices in festival operations. These demands were echoed in the Edmonton protest, resulting in EPFS agreeing to more community consultation before hosting Pride the following year. On April 10, 2019, however, EPFS sent out a letter stating their calendar of events for the year would be cancelled. EPFS would later go on to dissolve completely.<sup>27</sup>

However, this didn’t spell the end of Pride activities. Evolution Wonderlounge and Fruit Loop proceeded with street festivals, and Shades of Colour and Rarica Now, two of the groups involved in the 2018 Edmonton protests, hosted a rally to commemorate the 50th anniversary of New York’s Stonewall Riots. Many other community groups also hosted events during June, and smaller communities around Edmonton, such as St. Albert, Spruce Grove, and Fort Saskatchewan, also continued to host vibrant Pride celebrations.<sup>28</sup>

The COVID pandemic forced further changes to Pride. Instead of gathering in person for community celebrations, Pride went online with events held by Fruit Loop and other community groups. Thanks to the resiliency of our community, we learned the importance of Pride and that it could not be cancelled.

While it is still uncertain what form future Pride festivals in Edmonton will take, one thing remains certain from our history: pride will always find a way. Throughout its history, Pride has started, stopped, and faced ongoing challenges as part of its evolution, purpose, and meaning. From its earliest roots in protest and the celebration of our diverse identities and communities, Pride has and will always remain an essential part of Edmonton’s history.

22 The origins of Edmonton’s Pride Festival are hotly debated with some suggesting it started with a small gathering at Camp Harris in 1980 and others claiming it started years earlier.

23 Caley Ramsay, “LGBTQ Community to Mark 35 Years of Edmonton Pride with History Project,” Global News, January 11, 2015, <https://globalnews.ca/news/1767700/lgbtq-community-to-mark-35-years-of-edmonton-pride-with-history-project/>.

24 “Pride,” Fringe Theatre, June 15, 2017, <https://www.fringetheatre.ca/blog/pride/>.

25 “A first for pride week,” Edmonton Examiner, June 3, 2015.

26 Julia Parish, “A Canadian First, CFB Edmonton the First to Fly Gay Pride Flag,” CTV News, June 7, 2013, <https://edmonton.ctvnews.ca/a-canadian-first-cfb-edmonton-the-first-to-fly-gay-pride-flag-1.1316592>.

27 Phil Heidenreich, “2019 Edmonton Pride Festival cancelled,” Global News, April 10, 2019, <https://globalnews.ca/news/5154261/2019-edmonton-pride-festival-cancelled-email-april/>.

28 Jasmine Graf, “Alternate Pride Events Following Cancellation of Edmonton Festival,” Global News, June 7, 2019, <https://globalnews.ca/news/5258890/pride-festival-alternate-events-edmonton-cancelled/>.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

Edmonton Pride Walk and Run  
<https://pride.run>.

Fruit Loop Society of Edmonton  
<https://www.fruitloop.ca>.

History of Canadian Pride  
<https://www.queerevents.ca/canada/pride/history>.

Edmonton Transit Service (ETS) Pride Bus  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egRgc8BNdHE>