



Celebrating 20 years of Pride in Nashville

A look back at our city's Pride and those who shaped it

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From the tapping of a hundred activists' feet on a downtown sidewalk 20 years ago to a 10-day, city-wide celebration that draws thousands of GLBT community members and their straight allies, the growth of Nashville Pride has ebbed and flowed over these many years thanks to the efforts of dedicated volunteers both past and present.

According to the publisher of the GLBT weekly newspaper InsideOut and former Nashville Pride Board co-chair Linda Welch, a culmination of events lead to the birth of Nashville's first Pride back in 1988. Early that year, several members of Nashville's GLBT community traveled to Washington D.C. to participate in a civil rights march. Also that same year, and fueled by the rise of GLBT issues across the country, Stewart Biven and Jeff Ellis began publishing Query, Nashville's first GLBT publication.

"Query started people communicating," Welch said. "They'd pick up the paper and were able to see what was going on in the community."

With the lines of communication now firmly in place, members of the local community, with the help of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, were able to put together Nashville's first Pride March in June 1988. A modest 125 people met at Fannie Mae Dees (Dragon) Park that year with signs, walked through Vanderbilt University and then across West End Avenue into Centennial Park.

Because of the tense social climate at that time, participants in Pride events took on a more activist role than do most people today, Welch said.

"In the beginning, there were tons of protesters," said Welch. "You never knew if you'd turn a corner and have protesters there or have someone drive by and scream. Back then it was more of an activist thing, especially for those who were out or were coming out."

Jim Hawk, the current executive director of the GLBT cultural center OutCentral, stepped out of the closet in the early '90s and directly into a leadership role organizing Pride for two years. Welch said Nashville Pride remained a small event drawing in only a few hundred participants and a couple of vendors each year until Hawk took the reigns.

"He [Hawk] turned Pride around," Welch said. "It was a machine similar to what Nashville has now."

Hawk and Dewayne Fulton, president of the GLBT youth organization One-in-Teen, worked together with one main goal in mind — to make Nashville Pride bigger than it had ever been.

“We thought we could grow Pride if we pulled the entire community together,” Hawk said. They met with a variety of people from across the city and recruited people from different backgrounds to sit on the board.

“We thought it was important to get several points of view when planning the events,” said Hawk.

Hawk hosted the first Pride Ball at the Parthenon in Centennial Park, which helped raise the thousands of dollars necessary to turn Pride into a weeklong celebration. More than 100 volunteers worked with the board on planning fundraisers and booking entertainers. The standard for Nashville Pride had been set. After two years at the helm of the Nashville Pride Board, Hawk handed the duties over to Welch and Brad Beasley. (Beasley currently serves as the STD/HIV prevention and control director at the Metro Health Department.)

In 1995, Pride co-chairs Welch and Beasley moved the event to Riverfront Park. Raising the bar again that year, Beasley raised enough money to provide an officer on each street corner to block streets allowing for horses, motorcycles and floats in Nashville’s first Pride Parade. An estimated 8,000 people attended Nashville Pride that year.

Welch said the board exceeded their budget that year after having flown in five speakers. She and other board members were forced to walk through the crowd selling t-shirts and sodas to raise enough cash to pay the entertainers (who had heard there was no money left) before they would perform that day.

“We had to raise another couple hundred dollars in a half hour in order to pay each upcoming act,” added Welch. “But we did it. It was a really big success!”

Since Nashville Pride is organized solely by unpaid volunteers, there has always been a cycle of highs and lows for the event during times of turnover and change on the Pride Board.

Pam Wheeler, community activist and current co-host of Out & About Today, got involved with Pride in early 2000, a time when Nashville Pride almost didn’t happen. It was nearing time for the annual event but no one knew who was in charge of planning.

“A group of community leaders realized nobody was planning a Pride event in 2000,” Wheeler said. “So, some of us decided to step up and quickly get involved to avoid a lapse. We discovered the existing organization was no longer active after checking with the Secretary of State’s office.”

Soon thereafter, an ad appeared in Xenogeny, the GLBT weekly newspaper at the time now known as InsideOut, calling for community members to get together to discuss saving Pride. An estimated 70 people attended the meeting, Wheeler said.

With just 90 short days for planning, then Pride President Raney Pollos, with help from community leaders Keith Hinkle, Matthew Strader, Wheeler and a few others, successfully pulled off Nashville Pride 2000 at the Bicentennial Mall. Approximately 2,000 people and 30 vendors attended the event, up about 1,000 visitors from the previous year when volunteerism had lagged and the success of Pride dipped below the norm, Wheeler said.

Over the next few years under the leadership of Wheeler and subsequent presidents Mikhail Brown, Michael Basham and Todd Grantham, volunteers and/or board members David McKinnon, Brent Meredith, Marty Sewell, John Wade, Pamela DeGroff, Jason Adkins, Emily Benedict, Pat Finn, DeMarko Smith, Anthony Mollo, Jeanna Emert, Mac (Mcadoo), Doug Sladen, Josh Baker and many others (too numerous to list here) joined Nashville Pride with a desire to help take it to the next level.

Most of these volunteers had been to Pride in other nearby cities and wanted to see their hometown Pride grow and thrive. They wrangled their experiences together to create Pride events unique to Nashville and spent months planning the event, running TV and radio ads and bringing in new local and national sponsors. The crowd grew exponentially through the early 2000s and reached the volume most people recognize as Nashville Pride today.

This year's Nashville Pride Board, again with the help of invaluable volunteers, has continued the charge with a 10-day event. Highlights include the traditional Pride Pageant, Spirituality Night, Pride Week activities and big-name entertainers Ultra Nate and Kristine W.

Be sure to read all the Pride articles in this issue and visit Pride's Website, www.nashvillepride.org, to see what's in store for Nashville Pride's 20th anniversary.

We hope to see you there; let's make more Pride history together!