

A TIME TO BE PROUD

OONAGH KELLY/EDITOR

It's August 21 and the streets of Charlotte are brimming with a plethora of color. Thousands of people walk down the city's sidewalks, many of them wearing full-sized multi-colored flags as capes bought from booths lined up on Tryon Street, which are selling everything from rainbow bandanas to rainbow dog clothes. Everyone is smiling.

Among these smiling faces is South Pointe senior Julia Owens. Carefully planned rainbow-colored eye shadow shimmers above the rainbow face paint she had gotten from one of the booths earlier that day. Her excitement is tangible as she experiences Charlotte Pride for the first time.

"You walk into the street and there's rainbows *everywhere*," Owens recalled with a huge grin. "There's music blasting and everyone's just happy and everyone's dressed weird... It's crazy and fun and you feel very free because everyone else is being crazy... You're free to be you."

"It's very safe to be gay at Pride."

Charlotte Pride is a festival celebrating the LGBT+ community in and around the Charlotte-Mecklenburg county area that takes place over the course

of a weekend in August, culminating in a large parade on that Sunday. Dozens of local businesses sponsor activities throughout the festival, with companies like Wells Fargo and Dogtopia funding the stage used for performers and selling merchandise from their booths. It has been an annual tradition since it first officially began in 2001.

"Pride, at least to me, is the celebration of both the history of the LGBT+ community, as well as a time for people who may not be so accepted in their hometowns or just in their homes to be in this place of acceptance and excitement and joy," Owens stated. "It's very safe to be gay at Pride."

Pride-like events have been held in various locations within Charlotte since the 1970s, after a series of riots took place at the Stonewall Inn in New York City in 1969. During these riots, a group of predominantly African American trans women protested and fought back against police who were raiding the Inn, a popular hangout for people within the LGBT+ community. Very few businesses allowed openly gay people during the 1950s and 60s, so this fighting back against the closure of one of the city's few safe spots is often viewed as the most important event leading up to the LGBT+ rights movement within the U.S.

If you're wondering why you've never heard of these riots before, you aren't the only one.



“I think there was five minutes spent in history class on Stonewall,” Owens explained. “That’s a really big point in history. It was kind of the start of legitimate changes being made and we never talk about it.”

The LGBT+ struggle against prejudice has slowly become more widely recognized on a national level over the last few decades, but has been thrust into the regional spotlight within the last year with the passage of the HB2 Bill in North Carolina, which prevents those who identify as transgender from using their preferred bathroom when in public. This means that these individuals have to use the bathroom assigned to their birth gender, often forcing them into uncomfortable

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and dangerous situations.

Charlotte Pride 2016 carried a sense of the original Pride’s rebellion, with dozens of people carrying signs protesting HB2 in the parade and other people lining along the booths with petitions to get it repealed.

“I think Pride has always been political in a sense,” Owens said. “Pride

is a party, but Pride is much more than a party. There’s such a history of this fighting back against prejudizkn these recent events change that. I think it kind of brings it back to light.”

HB2 has definitely brought the fighting spirit back to life within the North Carolina community. Several news sources have reported that this year’s Charlotte Pride received around 130,000 people in its two days, making this not only the most attended Charlotte Pride ever, but

also one of the most attended Prides in the country.

Another one of these 130,000 attendees was South Pointe English teacher April Bates, who has attended every Pride Parade for the past three years. When asked why she started going, a smile spread across her face.

“My aunts, who are actually my husband’s aunts who I’ve adopted, they’ve kind of taken me in,” Bates explained. “They go to the Pride Parade every year. They’ve been together thirty-plus years... So, because I love them and because I

do believe in diversity and acceptance, when I was invited three years ago, I decided to go and now it’s

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kind of a family tradition.”

Much like Owens, Bates believes that Pride provides an important place of acceptance, especially for high school students who may not be completely comfortable with who they are. “I think we have young people in our community who think that they are the only one,” Bates stated. “I think it’s important for them to know that there are people and places where they can go and find acceptance and find some safety.”

Pride provides a unique opportunity for education on the LGBT+ community that isn’t often readily available. With around 10% of the nation’s population identifying as LGBT+ as of 2012, that’s a large chunk of the population that most people don’t know anything about.

“I think a lot of people only know the stereotypes. They know what they see on TV or what their grandparents say, and that’s it,” Bates commented. “They just kind of stop at that.”

In fact, people outside of the LGBT+ community are encouraged to come to Pride as “allies,” the title given to those who identify as heterosexual and support those within the community. Support like this allows attendees and organizers of the event to feel safe in an environment that often has several protesters, a problem which became so bad during the 2005 Charlotte Pride that Pride-like events were suspended from the city.

“Come to Pride,” Owens insisted. “It’s not just for gay people.”



For more information, go to www.charlottepride.org or scpride.org.

For support, go to www.thetrevorproject.org.

Trevor Project LGBT+ Help Hotline: 1-866-488-7386

Upcoming Pride Event: Winston Salem Pride, Oct. 15, 10 am - 5:30 pm

PHOTOS BY OONAGH KELLY

