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Rainbow smiles on Youth Pride

LGBT and allied youth from around the state and their supporters took to the streets of Boston to celebrate Youth Pride. Photo: Marilyn Humphries.

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Talk about timing. Standing in front of the several hundred youth gathered on Boston Common the afternoon of May 12, Youth Pride coordinator Kelly Lydon remarked that after years of bad weather, including the torrential downpour at last year's event, this year's Massachusetts Youth Pride festival was taking place on a bright, warm sunny day. She said she was grateful for the weather, for the safe space for LGBT youth and their allies, for the great crowd, for the entertainment line-up, which included two bands, a dance troupe, and a fashion show, and for the official proclamations marking the event signed by Gov. Deval Patrick and Mayor Thomas Menino.

"What more could we ask for?" asked Lydon.

As if on cue, there was a commotion towards the front of the crowd, with audience members looking up and pointing towards the sky and shouting. Lydon seemed momentarily confused until she, along with the rest of the crowd, looked up in the sky and saw a rainbow.

"Oh my God, it's a rainbow!" shouted Lydon, as the crowd exploded into cheers and applause. "Wow! Wow! I think I'm going to cry."

After the near-disasters of last year's Youth Pride, it's little wonder Lydon was overcome by what the crowd took to be a sign from above. Two days before last year's event then-Gov. Mitt Romney threatened to disband the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, which selected the youth committee that planned the event, after a press release for Youth Pride featuring his name and the state seal went out without his approval. Romney ultimately relented, but lawmakers responded by creating a new independent Massachusetts Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth to replace the old commission and insulate it from political pressure from the corner office.

Last year's Youth Pride also took place during an unrelenting rainstorm, forcing organizers to move the festival inside. The youth who marched in the parade that year returned to the festival soaked to the skin.

In contrast to the hostility directed against the event last year by the governor and the elements, this year's Youth Pride seemed to go off without a hitch. Kathleen Henry, interim president of the Friends of the Commission on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth, the nonprofit that funds and organizes Youth Pride, read an official proclamation from Gov. Patrick in honor of Youth Pride. While previous governors, including Romney himself, have issued similar proclamations, Henry said Patrick is the first to include a specific mention of bisexual and transgender youth in his proclamation, rather than referring simply to gay and lesbian youth. Reading from Patrick's proclamation, Henry announced to the crowd, "Whereas today's Youth Pride Day celebrates the lives and diversity of GLBT youth and their friends, now therefore I, Deval L. Patrick, governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, do hereby proclaim May 12, 2007 to be Massachusetts Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth Pride Day," prompting cheers from the crowd.

Patrick was also one of three honorees to receive a Youth Pride award for exemplifying this year's Youth Pride theme, "Make a statement." Patrick, who did not attend Youth Pride, was honored for his pro-LGBT political statements, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) of Boston was honored for its work in organizing the annual Day of Silence event to highlight the silencing of LGBT youth in schools, and Boston's resident rock star Amanda Palmer of the band Dresden Dolls received an award for her musical and fashion statements.

Of all the honorees Palmer, a Lexington native, seemed to prompt the most enthusiastic reaction from the crowd, which given her band's large LGBT youth audience and hometown hero status is little surprise. But Palmer, who has only occasionally discussed her sexuality in interviews, got even more applause when she announced to the crowd that she was a proud bisexual.

"I was out at my parents' house for dinner, which I sometimes do when I get home, and my mom and my step dad and I are sitting around the kitchen having a long, deep into-the-after-dinner-hour talk about kids and marriage and life and stuff in general, and I mentioned the fact that, my parents get all nervous when I mention it, but I mentioned the fact that I was bisexual, which I am—" said Palmer, before being interrupted by cheers from the crowd. She continued. "And my mom went, Amanda, Amanda, TMI [slang for "too much information"] ... It reminded me of one of my favorite things that my best friend and my mentor always says to me,

which is that just because a message isn't heard or doesn't want to be heard doesn't mean that it's not worth delivering."

Palmer also talked about growing up in Lexington and founding Lexington High School's first gay/straight alliance (GSA), BiGLASS, the Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Straight Society, with three of her friends during her senior year of high school.

"We didn't really do much. We were actually more excited about starting a group and it getting together and having a party, and it was one of those typical things of, there is no group, so we'll start a group ... We watched it sort of evolve as the years went on, and now there's actual organization and people have real things and a real name, and it's pretty amazing," said Palmer. (See "Say It Loud, I'm Bi and Proud," below.)

The rally also featured a speech by former gubernatorial candidate Grace Ross, who is currently running for Worcester City Council. Decked out in one of her trademark purple scarves, she talked about what it was like to run as the Bay State's first openly gay candidate for governor.

"There are folks who I ran into in the street after I ran who said to me, 'You know, one of the things I learned was that somebody who was gay or lesbian could be my leader.' That was a really important thing for them to learn," said Ross.

The Youth Pride parade was led by the rainbow-covered "South End Sara" Duck Tour boat and some antique cars. Close behind them, a couple hundred youth paraded through the streets of Boston, carrying banners for GSAs and LGBT youth groups from around the state, from Barnstable to Boston to Hingham and Newton. The parade was a sea of rainbow flags, and the youth filled the air with familiar cheers like, "One, two, three, four, open up your closet door! Five, six, seven, eight, don't assume your kids are straight!"

The only minor cloud on the festivities, one that likely went unnoticed by most attendees, was the presence of activists affiliated with the Newton activist Brian Camenker's anti-gay group MassResistance. Camenker has targeted LGBT youth-related events in the past, but he himself was nowhere in sight at Youth Pride. His MassResistance Radio co-host Amy Contrada, who also authors the MassResistance blog and serves on the board of two of MassResistance's sister groups, Parents Rights Coalition and the Parents Education Foundation, hovered along the outskirts of the festival with a camera at the start of Youth Pride, accompanied by a man with a video camera who identified himself to *Bay Windows* as Jim and declined to give a last name. When *Bay Windows* approached Contrada for comment she said, "Well, hello there, Mr. Weasel," but declined to say anything else. Jim claimed he was not affiliated with MassResistance.

"I just came down to film the event, you know? I have a cable show and I like to put things on the cable that are relevant things, you know?" said Jim. Once the speaking portion of the festival began Jim moved to the front of the stage to film the speakers.

MassResistance activists were out in full force at the parade, as well. As the youth marched past the Statehouse Contrada and Sally Naumann, another board member of Parents Rights Coalition and Parents Education Foundation, took photos of the marchers. Jim was also on hand to film the parade. Later on that evening Contrada tried to photograph attendees at the Boston Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth (BAGLY) Prom at Boston City Hall. One of MassResistance's tactics over the years has been to photograph LGBT-related events and place them on the group's website, accusing the sponsors and attendees of the events of perversion.

Yet it is unclear whether the youth marching in the Youth Pride parade noticed the MassResistance activists' presence. As Contrada tried to photograph the parade, a group of youth with pro-LGBT signs stood in front of her, holding up the signs to block her view. She was forced to climb onto a stone bench to get a shot of the marchers in all their rainbow-flag-waving glory.

Say it loud, I'm bi and proud

Amanda Palmer was honored at this year's LGBT Youth Pride for her musical and fashion statements. Palmer, one half of the punk-cabaret duo The Dresden Dolls (Palmer plays piano while Brian Viglione bangs the drums), addressed the crowd and came out in very public fashion as bisexual. *Bay Windows* chatted with Palmer after her address on the Common.

Q: Have you ever publicly come out as bisexual before talking about it during your Youth Pride speech?

A: [I've written about it] on the Internet. I've never sat down with the gay press. I mean, I've talked about it in some of the pre-press for True Colors [the Human Rights Campaign-sponsored concert tour that The Dresden Dolls are touring with this summer]. I've never actually not been open about it, but people don't usually ask, mostly because in all my years of being a performer I've never made an issue of it. No one else has ever made an issue out of it.

Q: What's it like saying it to a huge group of LGBT youth on the Boston Common?

A: It's really inspiring, because I remember being in high school, and I feel like I was in that generation of high school kids where it was just on the threshold of being okay.

Q: What year did you graduate?

A: '94. And it was like, me and my posse of punk and freaky friends, I think that was really the first generation — at least in Lexington, I'm not talking about a random high school in the Midwest — where we felt like it was totally legitimate and safe and cool to be like, "Yeah, I'm gay," to say, "Yes, I'm gay," or "I'm bi," or whatever. I meet a lot of our fans as we travel around the country, and it's just really cool to sense that little shift in how comfortable kids can be, being out, because I definitely notice a difference.

Q: Have you followed any of the news in Lexington around the work of anti-gay activists to take out pro-LGBT materials from the elementary schools?

A: No, I haven't. Lexington has always had its weird combination of a very liberal side, and yet sprinkled in there there's always a bunch of real jerks. When we were in high school we went through a whole issue with wanting to distribute condoms, and there was this group that just battled it, and the same group wanted to put an ad in my high school yearbook promoting abstinence. And so we fought back, and it turned into this big issue. But whatever. I have to say coming from Lexington I feel really lucky as far as schools go. It's a pretty tolerant place compared to a lot of what I hear from other high school kids, fans all across the country. You don't risk getting beat up for very much at Lexington High. You're just getting taunted and ridiculed and called a freak, but you don't really risk getting beaten up in the parking lot as much as some other schools, or shot, like in my neighborhood [the South End and Lower Roxbury]. I take that less and less for granted as the years go on and I travel around seeing what other kids are dealing with.

— Ethan Jacobs