

Column



OPINION: Rainbow crosswalk tells young people they have a future

Chilliwack-raised University of Regina professor weighs in on local controversy

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When Gilbert Baker designed the pride flag, it encompassed a world of possibilities. This was a prismatic future for LGBTQ2 folks, where we could see ourselves reflected. Orange symbolized “healing.” Purple was for “spirit,” which reminds us that the rainbow was always meant to be inclusive, rather than divisive. It was a way of saying, ‘You’re safe. You’re home.’

On Sept 3, 2019, Chilliwack’s city council voted against creating a rainbow crosswalk in Chilliwack’s historic downtown neighbourhood, Five Corners. This was in spite of previous community support for the crosswalk — citizens even linked rainbow flags together to imagine what the crosswalk would look like.

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The Squiala First Nation had already painted two crosswalks on their traditional territory (near Eagle Landing), with two more planned on traditional territory of the Tzeachten First Nation (at Vedder Crossing). Council's decision, in this case, did not reflect or acknowledge the enthusiasm and support of multiple communities.

So why am I writing about this?

I'm a professor of literature and sexual diversity studies at the University of Regina, but I grew up in Chilliwack. I'm a queer person who works every semester with LGBTQ2 students living in a small city in Saskatchewan (Treaty 4: traditional territory of the Cree, Saulteaux, Dakota, Lakota, and Nakoda peoples, as well as homeland of the Métis). We talk a lot about what it's like to grow up different in a small town, where few supports exist. In Regina we have a club that also doubles as a community centre, and its sign is a rainbow. That sign means something, even in the middle of a fierce prairie winter. Home.

When I was growing up in Chilliwack in the '80s and early '90s, people didn't talk much about gender and sexuality. That doesn't mean the town wasn't accepting and inclusive. The University of the Fraser Valley had a gay student group, and there were many unexpected spaces — cafés, comic

shops, hobby stores — where you could feel safe. The Book Man has had a section on LGBTQ2 literature for decades. Our community has always existed in Chilliwack.

The council's ruling was based on something called the Crosswalk Decoration Policy, which seems to be about making crosswalks as simple as possible. This is as much about crosswalks as anti-trans bathroom policies are actually about bathrooms. What it boils down to is that some people would prefer that we don't talk about LGBTQ2 folks. And young people lose the most in this equation, because a crosswalk is a symbol of acceptance. The rainbow says: You have a future. You will survive to see it. You belong on these streets.

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Councillor Sue Knott (Attrill) said that the crosswalk was a “political statement” which didn't deserve tax dollars. But support and harm-reduction aren't political statements. Reminding people that they exist — that they're valued — is a human act. Coun. Bud Mercer asked: “Where will it all stop?”

I have an answer. It won't. You can't stop progress. It won't stop as long as trans kids are frightened to use the bathroom. It won't stop as long as gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth are homeless. It won't stop while LGBTQ2 seniors and elders have no support. It won't stop because we all know someone in this community, and they're counting on us.

The answer isn't: move to Vancouver. Small towns need strong communities too. Chilliwack made me feel big. My hockey-playing friends accepted me. My teachers introduced me to the world of literature. I survived and I'm thriving.

Now extend that future to everyone in town.

Show them what home means.

Jes Battis teaches sexual diversity studies at the University of Regina and he grew up in Chilliwack