

In Providence: Pride



Photo by malone545 on Flickr

If you were at Providence Pride in 2002, you may have seen a shabbily-dressed 18-year-old wandering around looking for a boyfriend.

That was me.

It was my first Pride, and as such, it was equal parts wildy exhilarating and profoundly disappointing. This was before social media and YouTube and the ability to Google your way through whatever identity crisis you were experiencing.

Twenty years ago, if you were 18, newly out, and ready to experience all the LGBTQ community had to offer, you were basing your expectations off the limited content pop culture had gifted you. That meant I showed up to Pride expecting a combination of *Tales of the City* and certain segments of MTV's *Undressed*.

(A friend recently reminded me about *Undressed*, and if you need to blame someone for ushering in the raging sex-obsession of the aughts, I think that might be your culprit.)

Instead of the debauchery I was nervous about/hoping for, I found something much more subdued. This was because my friend and partner for the day had convinced me that we should get there as soon as the outdoor festival started. That meant it was us, a few vendors, and an *a capella* choir from Connecticut performing a medley of '80s hits.

Right from the beginning, I had one goal in mind.

I wanted to meet a gorgeous man, go steady by noon, and possibly get married before the parade so we could hop on a float in our matching tuxedos and wave at all the sad, single people in the crowd.

This was when meeting people was restricted to going out and introducing yourself to strangers (even now, a hard pass) or talking to screen names in AOL chat rooms, emailing grainy photos back and forth, and perhaps — if you were lucky — getting someone to call you on a landline so you could compare favorite episodes of *Dawson's Creek*.

Since I was beginning college in the fall, I was determined to have one of those summers like in the movie *Grease*, where I would meet an Italian guy on a beach and we would fall in love before running into each other again in a few months wherein I would change everything about myself and only wear leather from that point on.

I just needed to find my Danny Zuko first.

While there were no takers in the morning, I assumed that as the day wore on, I would start to see more attractive men filling up the lawn across from the Providence Place Mall. I had already practiced what I would say if someone approached me to give me their number.

"Me? You mean hot-but-not-in-a-conventional-way me??? Wow, I...gosh, gee, I can't believe...Well, sure I guess I wouldn't mind spending July in Majorca with you at your rich parents' third home."

Instead, every hot guy I saw from behind, when viewed from the front, turned out to be a lesbian. I don't know how much you know about lesbian haircuts from the early days of the 2000s, but they were pretty fantastic. Every woman you saw looked like Drew from *98 Degrees* and *all* of them had a better wardrobe than I did.

As the day wore on, the temperatures heated up, and my hair gel began to melt down the back of my neck. I had applied the kind of antiperspirant that has firefighters in its commercials, but even then, sweat stains were beginning to form under my arms. This was the opportune moment when actual hots began appearing.

In all the movies I'd seen, when a young gay man is first around a group of people like him, men are just tripping over themselves to get at him. I thought just by having the moniker of "Fresh-If-Discounted Meat" on me would be enough to get me three proposals by dinnertime, but guys would take one look at me and then keep walking by — either to the henna tent or to pretend they needed to find their friend in a crowd.

I'm not sure when "pretending to find your friend at an event" fell by the wayside in terms of killing time and not looking awkward, but it must have been around the time they let us look up terminal illnesses on our phones.

By the time the parade began, I had officially given up on love, dating and possibly my sexuality. I wasn't sure what the requirements were for becoming a lesbian, but there were a few I had my eye on, and I *did* know all the words to "Where Have All the Cowboys Gone?"

My friend left to meet up with a group of theater kids who were just getting there, and I took that opportunity to head back to my car and wallow. This was it for me. Pride was a bust and the beautiful wonderland I had been promised was a lie. Oh sure, I knew that being gay meant struggling. I knew there was a long history of oppression and resistance. I was prepared for all that if it meant that while I was being oppressed, I got to tough it alongside a guy who looked like Joshua Jackson in *Cruel Intentions*.

What nobody had told me was that being young and gay can be just as boring as being young and straight. The build-up you're capable of as a teenager can render each event underwhelming and the fixation on coupling up can create a laser focus that zaps the joy out of nearly everything.

There have been many Prides for me since then, and while some have been exuberant and some lackluster, very few have been boring, so I'm tempted to write that first one off as a fluke — except I don't think that's what it was.

How much of that day was me looking for someone to pair up with because that's how I would feel most at home in the label I'd adopted? When I came out in school, I had already known for years who I was, but I didn't see the point of being gay if it meant being the only one. Then I met another gay student, and suddenly there was a *reason* to be out. We dated for all of a week, he broke up with me, and I needed to find another reason.

Because intrinsically I understood that if being who you are already *others* you, then you need to *find* others who can travel that road with you. An alliance. A coalition.

A Community.

There were plenty of ways I could have found something like that at that first Pride, but I was 18. I had only gotten my first kiss a few months before, and I had only said "I love you" to some guy in a chatroom for fans of *Angel* who told me that if I sent him \$1,000, he could come visit me once he got out of jail.

If you've been to a Pride in Providence in the past 20 years, you probably had a very different experience than the one I had. The crowds have expanded. The block parties have gotten bigger. The chances of running into Danny Zuko have gone up *exponentially*.

Even now, though, there's a chance you might see someone wandering around, not sure of where they should go, or how they should act, or whether they're dressed appropriately. It might even be their first Pride.

Should you happen to see someone like that, go up and introduce yourself. Be a part of navigating the experience for them. Offer up some friendly guidance.

I can't say I found a great deal of pride in myself on that day 20 years ago, but I've discovered small pieces of it here and there since then. Maybe this month can be the month where we show each other all those pieces we've collected. Maybe Pride is what happens when we don't ask what we're missing, but what we're hoping to find.