

This week's post for LGBT+ History Month features a personal reminiscence from the Leader of North Hertfordshire District Council, some insights into the equalities policies that the council has created and a reminiscence by the blog author.

NHDC leader Martin Stears-Handscorn, a 70-year-old councillor who lives in Letchworth and is married to Ian, writes:

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*Growing up in Isle of Wight in the 1950s and 60s, being gay was not an option. Indeed, 'being gay' didn't mean what it does now and by the time I went away to Uni in 1969, I was engaged to a girl. I was questioning my sexuality and maybe that was why that relationship didn't last.*

*Homosexuality was illegal until 1967 and only then in private. As far as I knew I had never met a gay person – apart from an older lad at school who had been made fun of and accused of “being a homo”. I didn't want to be “one of them”.*

*I met a lovely woman when I came to work in Stevenage. One thing led to another and in 1976 we got married. Twenty years and four children later the marriage ended – mainly because for me, political activism came first.*

*That was the time of the Clause 28 attack on gay people, but I knew I was gay. Being married to a woman had always been something of a miracle to me and it wasn't likely to happen again.*

*There were few gay role models then (Warren in TV's This Life only seemed to manage a one-night stand. I was interested in finding a companion).*

*As a Baptist Christian, I was fortunate to attend a church in Hitchin where the Minister knew me well enough to listen when I came out to him and accompany me on my journey of accepting myself. I became part of LGBT Christian groups helping churches understand who gay people are. It is not a matter of choice but a matter of integrity!*

*In 2001 I attended the national conference of Baptists in Blackpool and there met Ian, who was to become my Civil Partner in 2008, the day before he retired. Yes, we do meet our needs as partners, but it is as much the little things that cement our relationship. Holding hands on a quiet beach and getting our feet wet. Now I feel when he takes me in his arms...*

*While I have been very fortunate, I am conscious that many LGBT people are much less fortunate, such as the 21% who suffered hate crimes in the last year. That's why people like me need to share our stories and why I am so proud that Hitchin is planning its first Pride event.*

North Hertfordshire District Council has put in place policies to ensure that everyone, *regardless of ethnic or national origins, race, colour, gender or transgender, age, sexual orientation, disability, marital status, trade union membership, political beliefs and religious beliefs*. There are nine so-called 'protected characteristics' under the Equality Act 2010 (age discrimination, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief (including lack of belief), sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity), things that define who we are. The council's policies state:



“ *Equality focuses on valuing these differences in employee's background and skills to create a diverse workforce.*

*It is recognised that to treat people equally does not necessarily mean to treat them all the same; it may involve the provision of different or extra facilities for people to enable them to achieve their full potential.*

*To achieve this aim the Council commits to apply the principals of equality (i.e. fairness, dignity and non-discrimination) to recruitment and selection, terms of employment, access to training, promotion and transfers and other employee benefits. No applicant or employee will be treated less favourably than another on grounds that are not relevant to the post.*



The Council must follow The Public Sector Equality Duty, dated April 2011, which created a single equality duty covering all the protected characteristics. Under this, every employee has a responsibility to deliver services to the public without discrimination. The Council wants employees to never suffer any form of unfair behaviour such as bullying or harassment at work, and from the outset of their employment it asks that employees afford their colleagues with the same standards of behaviour as they expect from

others.

If you go back little more than fifty years, none of these 'protected characteristics' were recognised and people could be discriminated against for the colour of their skin, their national origin, being a woman, being old, being of the wrong religion. Being gay wasn't even legal for men and being outed in the press often spelt the end of someone's career, the loss of their home and even imprisonment.

Thankfully, the world has changed, despite attempts to push back some of the gains (look at how the media deal with transgender people or how often 'queer-bashing' is reported, and you'll see that there is still a long way to go). Society today is generally more open and accepting of differences, although it is always possible to point to exceptions. When I (Keith,

the writer of the blog) was growing up, there were no positive role models: gay men were shown in fiction as tragic characters or as dangerous predators. On television, we were figures of fun ([Mr Humphries in Are You Being Served?](#) was the tip of an enormous iceberg). Being a gay teenager in the 1970s meant believing that you were sick.

What changed, for me, was getting involved in the local punk scene in Lancaster, where I was at university in the late 1970s. The pub where the punks all met – the Ring o’Bells – was also the city’s lesbian and gay pub. This was no coincidence. Punks were as much outcasts as gay people, and gay nightclubs were often the only places that would let in people with green hair, nose piercings and bondage pants. I felt at home in the pub and got to know people on both the punk and gay scenes, which overlapped. I came to understand that I could no more hide my sexuality than I could hide the hair I had dyed blue. And, better still, that it made me feel better not to hide it. I became a DJ in an ‘alternative’ nightclub, playing punk, post-punk and New Wave music, thinking this was the only sort of career path open to me, despite my degree in archaeology.

The early 1980s – before HIV/AIDs became seen as a danger to society – was a time of ‘gender-bending’ musicians (such as [target-“new”>Boy George](#) and [Annie Lennox](#)), politically-motivated bands ([Bronski Beat](#) are perhaps the best known). It seemed for a while as if anything was possible and that full equality was about to happen. In the late 1980s, Denmark became the first country to recognise same-sex relationships and, slowly, other governments began to see that allowing same-sex couples to register their relationships was a good thing.

Progress was slow and, as I’ve already said, we still have a very long way to go. But the changes meant that I was able to enter into a Civil Partnership with my partner on 21 December 2005, the first couple in Hertfordshire to do so. In 2014, the Civil Partnership was converted to Marriage (and in a bizarre ceremony, the registrar dissolved the former to create the latter through the single press of a button on her keyboard, back-dating the marriage certificate to the date of our Civil Partnership). Bahkti and I recently celebrated our Crystal Wedding anniversary. As a teenager struggling to come to terms with why I didn’t fancy girls but paid a lot more attention to the men’s diving in the Munich Olympics of 1972 when sport didn’t interest me in the slightest, I would never have thought that married bliss was something I could ever experience.

The world has indeed changed, and so have I.



Concentrating hard to avoid dropping the wedding ring!

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