

Anti-Nuke Kiss-In

On August 9, 1985, controversy was sparked when a lesbian and gay kiss-in on the steps of Kingston's City Hall was included as a part of a three-day anti-nuclear vigil to mark the 40th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Organizers in Kingston joined disarmament activists across the continent, planning events such as a candlelight march and the international Shadow Project, where shadows of dead bodies were drawn on streets to commemorate those vaporized in the attack. Francois Lachance, the spokesperson for the group, told *The Whig-Standard* that they had chosen City Hall as the symbolic location to stage the kiss-in because city council had refused applications for both a Gay Pride Day as well as requests from citizens to declare Kingston a "nuclear-free zone."

On the day leading up to the event, an article emblazoned across the front page of the *Whig* entitled "Gay anti-nuke kiss-in idea shocks city mayor" provided Mayor John Gerretson and several of the other aldermen's views on the subject. Gerretson refused to acknowledge a connection between the kiss-in and disarmament, claiming that "it is very unfortunate that this sad occasion should be drawn in comparison with the problems faced by the gay community." The newspaper reported that Alderman Ken Matthews "laughed when told of the ceremony," and responded by saying:

I think they should get permission from council. I don't think they have the right to block the street and City Hall. There will be a big crowd. Just because they were refused the first time [to have a Gay Pride Day declared] doesn't mean they should go ahead and break the law because they think they will be refused again. They're giving peace a bad name.

The organizer of a three-day vigil in Macdonald Park, Toni Pickard, told the *Whig* that she was hesitant when she first heard of the proposed event, but that the connection made sense to her once the ceremony was explained:

The development of the male gender role trains men to be combative and competitive and discourages them from being affectionate...The development of nuclear warfare is just the most obscene manifestation of that (tendency). This is a way of being courageous publicly as a statement that one has to be courageous publicly in order to resist development of the nuclear threat.

One city councilor agreed with Pickard. She told the *Whig*, "I think they are extremely courageous. I got a taste of the vehement hatred that exists towards homosexuals during the time council was debating Gay Pride Day." Lachance wanted to "use public space to show that both issues need to be on the political agenda," and explained that there is not only a need to disarm, but also to "create space for peace." He understood that the kiss-in wasn't going to change the minds of Kingston's city councilors. In fact, he told the *Whig* that it would take "a lot of education" before that happened.

Although the ceremony itself lasted only fifteen minutes, it attracted over 400 onlookers and was described as “a kiss that reverberated throughout Kingston.” The public’s responses to the kiss ran the gamut from curiosity to outrage. Most of the crowd applauded, but some showed their disapproval by booing. During Lachance’s speech at the beginning of the event, a woman named Rebecca Reed challenged the kiss-in by shouting that there was no connection between disarmament and gays. As the crowd dispersed, Reed continued to shout and her husband said that he was “surprised there weren’t more people yelling at them. I expected there’d be more church people out here.” In a letter to the editor, Reverend C.G. Votary expressed his opinion on the link between disarmament and the kiss-in:

It seems to me that the connection is blatantly obvious. Homosexuals and lesbians kissing each other in public are the products of sick minds and emotions, disarmament by North America in the face of the ideologies of communist Russia is also the product of sick minds and emotions.

City council members like Alderman Bill Jamieson agreed, referring to the event as a “sick-in.”

The following day, a picture of Philip MacDougall and Ford Barker embracing and kissing was featured on the front page of the *Whig*. The newspaper conducted an informal telephone survey and found that most readers were critical of the photo. In fact, two people were so furious with the photograph that they cancelled their subscriptions to the paper. In the following days, a number of blatantly homophobic comments and letters to the editor were published in the *Whig*. One woman told the *Whig* to stop publishing “sordid pictures of society’s abnormalities,” and another resident commended city council on their decision “not to let the homosexuals have their gay parade.” Unlike the newspaper, CKWS Television refused to broadcast the kiss entirely. Their executive vice-president called the kiss a “sensational stunt” and accused the “gay movement” of “trying to manipulate the media.”

A couple of days after the kiss-in, half a dozen gay activists gathered to participate in a workshop on homophobia. According to the *Whig*, all of the participants said that there was “considerable homophobia in the Kingston community,” but that the kiss-in provided the opportunity for heterosexual residents to show their support. Lachance was “amazed at the attentive way the crowd listened to his brief speech,” and highlighted that the event sparked discussions as people strove to understand. Although there was considerable support, Lachance was subjected to abusive telephone calls and Fred Barker, one of the men in the photo, received death threats.

The editorial cartoon that the *Whig* published on the day of the kiss-in further demonstrated the hostility shown towards queer folk in Kingston. A plane bearing the name “Enola Gay Pride,” evoking memories of the aircraft that dropped

the first atomic bomb on Japan, was pictured discharging a bomb called "AIDS." Thus, it served to reinforce the common and damaging misconception at the time that gay people were responsible for the outbreak of AIDS. One individual wrote a letter to the editor expressing her "shock and outrage" at the printing of this cartoon, calling it a "narrow-minded, petty jab at an oppressed group," and aptly pointing out that "by printing it on the editorial page...*The Whig-Standard* is legitimizing this narrow view."

Despite the highly vocal backlash of bigots, the kiss-in succeeded in creating space for dialogue in Kingston. Lachance was shocked by the high turnout to the event, but believed that curiosity was a healthy sign because "it pushes people to uncover information," and "[t]hat's how one teaches."