

Speaking out about coming out

Mr Gay Northern Ireland talks to Headliners



Could you tell us your name and little bit about yourself? My name is James Smallman. I'm 22. I live in Derry, I've always lived here. I currently work for the Millennium Forum in Derry.

Can you tell us about your title as Mr. Gay Northern Ireland? I entered the Mr. Gay Northern Ireland competition in October 2008, just as a favour for a friend. He was organizing a heat for the competition and then he ended up asking me to represent Derry for the competition. So I did and I went to what I thought was just going to be a fun weekend in Dublin. I got through and was crowned Mr. Gay Northern Ireland. It was a wonderful feeling actually, I had a great time in Dublin and I really enjoyed the experience. It was nice to meet other people from around the country and find out their experiences of being gay. It also gave me a good opportunity to travel to Canada for the Mr. Gay World competition and Oslo for the Mr. Gay Europe competition. And it gives me a chance to experience even more stories from people from all across the world about coming out and being gay.

Could you share your experience as a young man coming out in Derry? I came out four years ago, when I was 18. I just told a few close friends. I was quite nervous about coming out and was worried how people were going to take it and what their reactions would be. I came out to my parents about a year after that. I gained some more confidence and I got the support of my family and my peers. I was quite surprised about how understanding my parents were. Neither of them had any issues with it. They were more concerned about my safety and how it was going to affect my life and my future, but they were very supportive and everyone I know has been. I actually had a very nice coming out experience.

Have you had any negative experiences of homophobia? I have. I've been both physically and verbally abused because of my sexuality. Throughout some of secondary school it was pretty bad at times. Just more verbally than it was physical. I've been in trouble in the town twice. I've been beaten up by people just because of my sexuality. Quite a troubling experience and painful at times, but it's only happened a few times to me. From those experiences I was quite happy about how it was actually dealt with, both by the police and the support network I have, friends and family.

How did this affect you? At the time, I felt awful. It does play on your self-esteem and it can have quite a bad effect on you. You kind of think, 'why me?' simply because of my sexuality, something that I have no control over.' I actually came out of it a stronger person.

Do you work with young people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender? I work for the local gay and bisexual men's health organisation, The Rainbow Project. I do quite a lot of work with gay, bisexual and transgender people. I really enjoy the experience as well. I took part in organising the Foyle Pride festival last year, which again was centred around the whole community. I really enjoy doing that sort of work. It's nice to do something you feel could benefit your community.

How bad do you think the problem of homophobia is for young people in Derry? I think it's changed considerably in the last 10 or 15 years. There used to be a saying in Derry 'you go away to be gay.' People in Derry then would come out and move off to the likes of England or America, and there's people who still live there now because of the prejudice they faced here. [The Rainbow Project](#) and the PSNI have actually done a lot of work to combat homophobia in Northern Ireland. Derry's one of the safest places to be gay now. It has some of the lowest homophobia figures across the country. It can still be difficult, most definitely, but the work by organizations like The Rainbow Project and the PSNI can make Derry even safer for young gay people here.

Is the problem of homophobia among young people increasing in Derry? I think it's decreasing actually. Just from what I've seen. People seem to be coming out a lot younger now than they used to be in years past. In the 90s or the 80s, you never would have heard of a 14 or 15 year old coming out to their friends, telling them that they were gay. I think people are more understanding now. You're still going to get people who are very narrow-minded, people who are homophobic towards people. However, the more visible the gay community are, the more understanding and the more tolerant they'll be. I think young people are starting to realise that and are saying, "You know what? Sod the negative people, I am who I am and I'm going to show who I am."

Do you feel that the police take notice of the gay population? Police pay a lot of attention to hate crime. They have a specific legislation set up for it now, whereas they didn't in the past. Certainly, from my experience, when my attack was reported there was action taken right away. There is also a greater presence of police in the town centre on the weekends too. It does have an affect on the people that would normally try to attack gay people in the street.

Recently the Pope announced that he was anti-gay. Has this had any affect on those young people coming forward for advice that would class themselves as christian? Again, this isn't from my own experience but it's from what I've understood. People aren't put off by it. If they are devoted to it then they will practise their faith, regardless of what the Pope thinks, and they're quite happy to do so. I'm sure it has a negative impact on their self-esteem and their sense of community. That's why people belong to a church, because they want to feel part of a community and I think it sort of separates them from others, but at the end of the day, if they want to practise their faith, any faith for that matter, then they will, regardless of what the Church preaches.

What are your feelings on the legalisation prohibiting gay and lesbian people from adopting and how do think this will effect gay, lesbian and bisexual young people as they approach adulthood? I think it's absurd that a gay or lesbian couple could not be given the opportunity to adopt. I mean, there are families out there who just don't look after their children and they don't give them a loving home. Gay, lesbian and bisexual people can offer a loving home for children and I think they should be given that opportunity. I don't think that if children grew up in a gay family that it would have any impact on that child's sexuality at all. Sexuality is predetermined, there's nothing that could make you straight or gay. So I don't think growing up in that sort of atmosphere could have any impact on your sexuality. It could actually have quite a positive impact, if they were given the opportunity to set up a nice loving and accepting home for the child.

What would you like to see being done about the ongoing attacks on gay, lesbian and bisexual young people? Well, I don't agree with violence towards anyone, regardless of their race, sexuality or any aspect of their being. I think there needs to be legalisation to assure that these people won't carry out these actions again. I think it's also important for people like that to sit down and actually meet the people that they are prejudiced against and try to work around some of their own prejudices.

What would be your advice to any young person who is unsure or confused about their sexuality? Know that they're not alone. It can be a very isolating experience coming to the realisation that you are gay, bisexual, lesbian or transgender but there is a huge support network out there. We are a community in our own right and there will be a great support network for anyone who is gay, bisexual or just curious. And certainly get in touch with The Rainbow Project or any other organisation that are there to help with the whole experience which can be daunting.

About this Interview

This interview was conducted by Kareena Harkin (14) and Seana Hampstead (14)

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