

## Acceptance all round

**The Northwest currently has one of the best support systems available in Northern Ireland for young people who are confused about their sexuality.**

Most young people today will know of and accept other young people who identify as gay lesbian, bisexual or transgender in their school or community.

The fact that this is accepted more today compared to years ago is because of fantastic organisations such as The Rainbow Project, set up in 1994, which provides a safe haven for both gay and bisexual men across the county. There are also women within the project.

The people who are a part of the project develop physically and mentally and get a lot out of the project. Richard Feeney (17), said: "The Rainbow Project does help a lot".

The Rainbow Project organises several events throughout the year, raising awareness of the large gay community in the city and subsequently raising acceptance. Every August during the gay pride festival there is a walk across the city which helps liberate and encourage other young gay people in the community who may be feeling the strain of coming out. In August 2007 the Free Derry mural in the Bogside was painted pink to create awareness.

The Rainbow Project are not the only organization that help the local gay community. The PSNI work closely with the Rainbow Project in order to help prevent homophobic attacks happening across the city. James Smallman (22), former Mr Gay Ireland is from Derry. He told us: "Organizations like the Rainbow Project and the PSNI are continuing to make Derry even safer for young gay people."

No matter how hard the PSNI and Rainbow Project work to prevent homophobia in the city some incidents have slipped through the cracks. For example, a 17-year-old student was severely beaten by six grown men in a homophobic attack in John Street in the city recently. On a day-to-day basis a lot of young people experience verbal abuse at their school or college. Jamie

Neill

(17) commented on how people reacted to him 'coming out', saying "People of course were idiots about it".

Contrary to popular belief the attacks within the city have started to dwindle and in some places die out. Since 2004 the PSNI have reported that the figures of homophobic attacks in Derry have shrunk from 75 per year to just 10. This shows that there is growing acceptance within the city, as more people have the confidence to accept who they are. Jamie

Neill

also told us about how he learned to accept himself saying, "When someone said to me 'you're gay' I'd say 'yeah, and your point is?'".

The Northwest has some of the lowest homophobia figures across the country. The fact that our city has achieved this should be used across the country to help other areas achieve this also.

### About this story

This article was written by Tola Stewart and Clodagh Devine

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