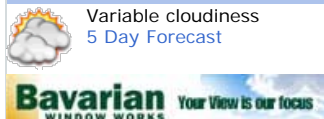


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Gay wedding show a milestone

February 28, 2010

BY TERRY PENDER, RECORD STAFF

KITCHENER — Deb Gollnick and Judith Lodi had front row seats for the wedding fashion show along with their friends Suzanne and Shelley Welstead.

They were among more than 200 people who came out Sunday for The Gay Wedding Show at the Delta in downtown Kitchener.

It was a cultural milestone for this city.

Gollnick, who lives in Kitchener, and Lodi, who lives in Waterloo, are talking marriage and making plans.

"When I look back on my 20s, members of our community were meeting in areas that were rooms under garages, and homes that you only heard about through word of mouth," Lodi said. "So now being in the centre of Kitchener in a major hotel chain attending a gay wedding show is absolutely great."

Gollnick agreed.

"While we are gay or lesbian, we still want to celebrate those monumental rituals of life as any heterosexual couple does, and so to be recognized for that is really positive," Gollnick said.

"We started out fighting for our rights, now that our rights are protected by law, I think we are more fighting for recognition and visibility in the community. So our fight has changed a little bit," Gollnick said.

The Delta donated the space. About 40 vendors — including jewellers, photographers, dress makers, catering companies, a craft soap-candle-perfume maker, cosmetics, event planners, and a bank — bought space for booths.

The show was organized by Joan Brennan of London. She started The Gay Wedding Show and held the first event in London last year. Another in the Forest City is planned for May. The show in Kitchener was only her second.

Brennan, a veteran chef-caterer-club owner, is tapping into a lucrative niche market for gay travel, tourism and marriage.

"People don't realize how much progress we have made in the last 10 years," Brennan said. "There is still subtle discrimination. The one I love is: 'You people.' "

The Gay Wedding Show is designed to be comfortable for all members of the gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgendered community.

"And that's what makes this a different bridal show," Brennan said.

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Suzanne and Shelley Welstead were married more than a year ago. They sat with friends in the front row for the fashion show, chatting, laughing and sipping champagne.

"When we got married there wasn't an event like that," Shelley said.

Suzanne remembers attending a wedding show that left her feeling alienated.

"There was this one ad that stood out, and this is what it said: 'A wedding without an officiate is like a bride without a groom.' And I came home and there was nothing for me, and I went: 'Well I am a bride without a groom,'" Suzanne said.

Both are quick to acknowledge progress in their community's struggle for acceptance, but what continues to irk Suzanne is the presumption she is heterosexual when meeting people for the first time.

"What is really interesting for me are the assumptions that are still made," Suzanne said. "That's where we have to go, relearning and reworking assumptions."

When people see her diamond-studded rings they almost always assume she has a husband.

"You know what would be nice? It would be nice if someone just said: 'Who is your partner?'" Suzanne. "Just remove those assumptions."

The Wedding Show vendors included some veteran businesspeople, such as Pam Macguire and Mark Bingeman.

Macguire, who owns B-G Diamonds & Gold in downtown Kitchener, was also a major sponsor of the event.

"It is fun to be a trailblazer, to do something new for a different demographic," Macguire said.

"I think they have done a fabulous job," Macguire said. "It's something to grow like this as a community."

In 2005, the federal government passed the Civil Marriage Act that legalized same-sex marriages. The courts in eight provinces and one territory had already ruled that same-sex unions were legal. But long before those watershed rulings, Bingemans hosted receptions for gay couples celebrating their vows.

"We are doing quite a few gay weddings now," Bingeman said. "We do enough that it is not infrequent."

Events like this are good for business.

"Do I expect to book business because of today? Absolutely," Bingeman said. "If you look at the stats on gay travel, gay tourism, gay marriage, this is a global phenomenon."

Dallas Nofall, known as DJ Dallas, provided the wedding show's music, and works at a couple of gay and lesbian events each month.

"The business community is very supportive because they recognize all the commercial potential here," Dallas said.

"People recognize it is an untapped community. The businesses here are the first to reach out and the lesbian and gay community will be very loyal, they will support them."

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