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June 17, 2019

Law School News

Roger Williams Celebrates Pride

The School of Law joins record crowds celebrating Rhode Island PrideFest in Providence.



RWU Law's contingent in the Pride Parade.

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Michael M. Bowden

The RWU Law and Roger Williams undergraduate communities turned out in force Saturday for Providence's 2019 Rhode Island PrideFest celebration, culminating in a unique and spectacular Illuminated Night Parade.

Drawing heavy attendance from across the state and around the country, this year's Pride event—themed “Live Your Truth”—was billed “a celebration of love, respect and joy.” It has come to be considered one of the city's signature events.

RWU Law Dean Michael J. Yelnosky, who marched in the parade alongside law students and staff, said the event reflected the values of the school.

“It was a special opportunity for the law school to publicly declare its belief in the fundamental dignity of all people, and particularly our support for the right of all individuals to follow their hearts and openly love without fear,” Yelnosky said. “As current and future lawyers, we have an obligation to think about the ways law can be used to help establish and protect that right. This was also a way for us to come together as a community around our shared values—an act that binds us closer together.”

Michael Donnelly-Boylen, RWU Law’s assistant dean of admissions, and a leader on issues relating to the inclusion of the LGBT population in legal education, also marched with the RWU Law contingent, organized by 2L Blake Johnson.

“It was a really special night,” Donnelly-Boylen said. “Providence was so alive and the crowds were unbelievable. The world has been a lot less friendly to the LGBTQ+ community lately, and so this year’s outpouring of love felt particularly special. This was RWU’s first time in the parade and I was so thankful to be included, and to march alongside so many of our amazing students. They make us all so proud.”

“Roger Williams undergraduates from the Sexuality and Gender Alliance (SAGA) marched alongside the law students. Gabby Porcaro, assistant director of Queer and Trans Initiatives at RWU’s Intercultural Center, shared why PrideFest is important for the Roger Williams community.

“This year marks 50 years since the first ‘Pride’ [event] in this country, which took place at the Stonewall Inn in New York City,” she said. “Fifty years later, we still have significant hurdles in the way of achieving true equity in this world. Pride is important because it is a time where queer and trans folks can, as they are able, boldly state that our existence is not a crime and it is something to be celebrated.”

In terms of sheer numbers, this year’s Pride event was Providence’s largest ever—a massive shift from the first parade held in 1976, which required a federal court order and met heavy opposition from city police. Over the ensuing decades, the celebration gradually grew, but still remained largely within the local LGBTQ community.

“Then, it was gay,” one participant told *The Providence Journal*. “Now, it is everybody.”

Banks and other corporate establishments hung out rainbow flags; Democratic politicians mixed and mingled with celebrants. Many speculated that the large turnout and high enthusiasm were in part a reaction to a recent statement by Roman Catholic Bishop Thomas J. Tobin of Providence that Catholics should not support Rhode Island Pride, as well as Washington’s more hostile stance toward people of non-traditional sexual orientations in recent years.

“I feel like because of what’s happened and the climate this year, everybody is more open, smiling, welcoming than usual,” another long-time participant told the *Journal*. “People are feeling put upon, and to lessen that, the best thing is love.”