

Small-Town Pride Celebrations Supporting Social Connectedness & Well-Being for LGBTQ+ Rural Residents

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Key Findings

- Pride celebrations are a critical component of acceptance and well-being for many in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) community, yet little is known about their role in rural areas.
- This case series profiles two successful small-town Pride celebrations: East Central Minnesota Pride in Pine City, Minnesota, and Hastings Pride in Hastings, Nebraska.
- Small-town Pride celebrations serve a critical role in social connectedness and well-being for LGBTQ+ rural residents.

Purpose

The purpose of this case series is to highlight organizations in two states doing exemplary work to celebrate and affirm lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) individuals in their rural communities through Pride events. These may serve as examples to others considering this work.

Background and Policy Context

Social connection is a known determinant of health at both community and individual levels.¹ Various aspects of identity affect how socially connected people are, and whether they feel they belong in their community. Rural residents report larger and stronger social networks than urban residents.² However, they also face unique risks for social isolation and loneliness.³⁻⁵ Feelings of social connectedness and belonging also vary by sexual orientation and gender identity. For example, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adults report lower social cohesion in their neighborhoods, which may be perpetuated by discrimination and homophobia from members of their community.⁶ In addition, recent research found that rural LGB adults reported the lowest levels of having their social and emotional needs met, compared with urban LGB adults, urban heterosexual adults, and rural heterosexual adults.⁷

Celebrations are an important contributor to social connectedness, and ultimately to community and individual-level health and wellbeing.⁸ Community-wide Pride celebrations, which began after the Stonewall Riots in 1969,⁹ specifically increase visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals.¹⁰ Pride celebrations, including parades and festivals, offer an opportunity to recognize changes, build community, and raise awareness of ongoing issues.^{11,12} This is especially crucial in rural areas, where Pride celebrations have the potential to provide vital morale boosts for LGBTQ+ rural residents.¹³ Indeed, they are important in increasing awareness and combating interpersonal and institutional discrimination caused by homophobia, transphobia, and

other forms of prejudice. Addressing those issues and improving the social and political climate for LGBTQ+ individuals is essential for improving health and well-being and reducing health disparities on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.¹⁴⁻¹⁶

This case series highlights examples of two small-town Pride celebrations that contribute to social connectedness and belonging for rural LGBTQ+ community members.

Approach

We identified rural organizations hosting Pride celebrations in their communities. This was done by a combination of an online environmental scan of existing programs, and contacting rural organizations of whom we had existing knowledge to ask about any local LGBTQ+ Pride celebrations.

Primary data were collected through key informant interviews, conducted via Zoom in March and April 2022. We analyzed each case study individually in order to identify key themes, including challenges and opportunities related to social connectedness and well-being for LGBTQ+ individuals in rural areas.

Case #1: East Central Minnesota Pride, Pine City, MN

Rural Community Context

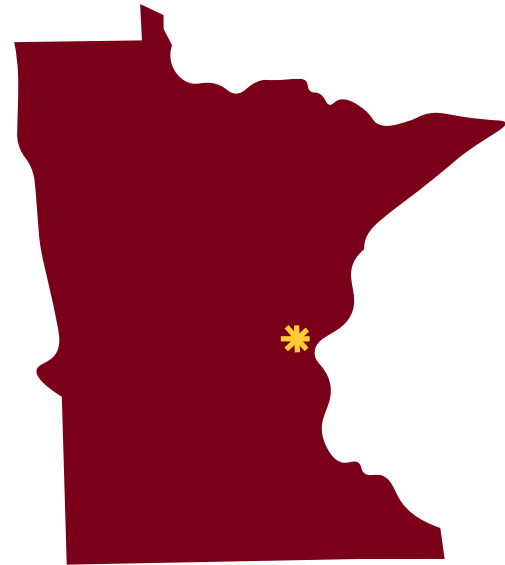
Pine County is situated in east-central Minnesota and is home to approximately 29,000 Minnesotans.^{17,18} It is one of the least healthy counties in the state, ranking in the lowest quartile, with substantially poorer quality of life measures and worse health behaviors compared to state averages.¹⁹ Pine County's largest employer is the Grand Casino Hinckley, owned by the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe.²⁰ Surrounding Pine County, the five-county central Minnesota region is home to 171,703 Minnesotans and includes Isanti (pop. 41,906), Chisago (pop. 57,469), Kanabec (pop. 16,159), and Mille Lacs (pop. 26,867) Counties.^{21,22}

We spoke with three members of the East Central Minnesota Pride planning committee: Julie Redpath, Nathan Johnson, and Phil Schroeder. They are all leaders in local LGBTQ+ support and advocacy in the five county east central region.

Organizational Overview

East Central Minnesota Pride began nearly twenty years ago. It was the first small-town Pride in Minnesota, and one of the first rural Pride celebrations in the country.²³ The East Central Men's Circle (a support group for

Figure 1: Map of Minnesota showing Pine City, MN



gay, bisexual, and transgender men) formed in 2000. For its fifth anniversary celebration, the group decided to join forces with the East Central Purple Circle (a support group for lesbian, queer, and transgender women) to throw an event that included the entire LGBTQ+ community, as well as allies, throughout the five county region. Thus, in 2005, East Central Minnesota (ECMN) Pride was born. The initial event was put on with a very modest budget. It was, as Johnson described, a “come as you are, bring what you can” potluck-style celebration. Musical entertainment and a silent auction were part of the celebration, but it was bare bones compared with the Prides of more recent years. Still, it enabled people to get together, celebrate, and form connections that offered up real value to the community.

Pine City has hosted East Central Minnesota Pride since its inception. A number of individuals, including Johnson, who were part of the Men's Circle group that founded ECMN Pride were from the Pine City area, and it is centrally located within the five county region. Johnson noted that it is also reflective of the type of community that is around the region. “It’s a quintessential Minnesota small town. You’ve got the town square, mom and pop shops, a strong sense of community, a mix of liberal and conservative leanings...it hits the mark as far as the type of place representative of the region.” In 2005, the city did not seem to have Pride on its radar as an event that would actually take place; the lawn at the park they reserved had not even been mowed for the event. Now, seventeen years later, ECMN Pride works in tandem with Pine City on preparations for the event

to make it even stronger and more successful.

The target audience for this event is primarily the LGBTQ+ community of the five county region. However, beyond that, Johnson discussed the event as demonstrating a kind of staying power for LGBTQ+ folks in rural Minnesota. “It shows people in Minneapolis and beyond that there are LGBTQ+ people living in communities like North Branch, Pine City, Mora, etc. and that’s eye-opening for some people.” In fact, not only are there many LGBTQ+ individuals living in rural Minnesota, but according to US Census data, Pine County is home to the highest concentration of same-sex married couples outside of any metro area in Minnesota. The rural, LGBTQ+ community clearly exists in this area, but members of the community may feel isolated, without an LGBTQ+ bar or coffee shop, without many LGBTQ+-affirming places of worship, and without other designated LGBTQ+ gathering places. Togetherness, Johnson noted, is what Pride tries to offer: “We’re saying ‘Come out, come out wherever you are. Come join us, we’re here for you!’”

East Central Minnesota Pride is a 501(c)(3), which gets its funding from a variety of sources, including individual and business donations, as well as grants. A grant from the East Central Regional Arts Council funds their entertainment. Music has always been a foundational part of ECMN Pride celebrations, Schroeder noted. He added that in writing their grants, “we really emphasize breaking isolation and using culture – music, entertainment – to give people isolated an opportunity to experience culture.” ECMN Pride also receives donations through GiveMN24 and other online platforms. In ad-

dition, garage sales, fundraisers, and a small vendor fee contribute to their funds each year. Schroeder said that the event costs approximately \$10,000 per year; after each event, they seem to have just enough to get set up and then they begin raising money to make sure it happens the next year. Gratefully, he noted, ECMN Pride has always been very organized. A board and committee structure from the onset has made planning for and reproducing the event smoother than it otherwise would have.

Key Features

ECMN Pride Board Members highlighted how much having a Pride celebration boosted rural LGBTQ+ individuals’ and the entire community’s well-being. Its importance spans generations of rural LGBTQ+ residents in the area, from young people to older adults.

Schroeder highlighted the importance of Pride for youth mental health, “For one day in their lives LGBTQ+ kids can come and be themselves, and mingle with others like them.” ECMN Pride does an evaluation of the event, which offers affirmation of how meaningful the event is for individuals’ mental health. Schroeder said the notes “...say things like, ‘It was the greatest day of my life’ or ‘I was able to come and be happy and welcomed and that’s not available for me at home.’” On the other end of the age spectrum, Redpath reflected on how vital Pride events are for LGBTQ+ older adults, especially those aging in place without their life partners. She recalled a widowed lesbian woman in her eighties from the area who was unaware of other LGBTQ+ individuals living in her community; she found out about Pride, and has been a regular attendee every year since.

In addition, there is a distinct component of physical health to the ECMN Pride celebrations. One of their initial sponsors was the Rural AIDS Action Network, which hosted an HIV/AIDS testing booth for as long as their budget allowed it. In recent years, Planned Parenthood has taken over to continue offering HIV/AIDS testing during the event. During the 2021 ECMN Pride celebration, the Minnesota Department of Health and the Pine County Health Board offered COVID vaccination and testing. Rainbow Health Minnesota also financially supports ECMN Pride on the condition that the event is smoke-free and chemical-free. ECMN Pride complies with the understanding that throwing a smoke-free, chemical-free event is a health-conscious way to support individual and community wellness.

Beyond the direct mental and physical health impacts, Pride offers the entire community a way to gather



Ribbon-cutting for East Central Minnesota Pride 2019, photo courtesy of ECMN Pride and <https://eastcentralminnesotapride.org/photos/>

and experience music and art together. Board members are proud of the quality of entertainment they have been able to achieve for the event. ECMN Pride boasts big name musicians and entertainers that have emceed or performed year after year. The celebration also includes art activities and a reading room for children, all of which can help to foster a sense of community.

Redpath noted that, perhaps, in an upstream way, Pride could even influence the Census by encouraging residents to participate and answer questions honestly, which in turn could lead to better well-being for the LGBTQ+ community in rural Minnesota by having a more accurate count. Knowing that their neighbors are supportive of their sexual orientation or gender identity could enable LGBTQ+ rural residents to be more comfortable honestly claiming their membership in the LGBTQ+ community. While the U.S. Census Bureau has not historically collected information on sexual orientation, it is possible to identify same-sex households, including same-sex marriages in Census data.²⁵ Further, the U.S. Census recently began exploring adding questions on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) to its Household Pulse Survey.²⁶ Having accurate data on SOGI is important to understanding the size and demographics of the LGBTQ+ community in rural areas, and that data can help to inform policy and health promotion efforts.

Challenges and Opportunities

East Central Minnesota Pride has faced ongoing challenges within the local community since its inception. For example, Redpath recalls the event center they used for the first few years was suddenly booked on their standard June date, in an intentional effort to stop the event. She reflected, “That sent a strong message. But, it made us more determined, and it even moved us to a better location.” She noted that they had already been discussing moving the event to a different park closer to the center of the town, but the thing that really pushed it happening was that their usual venue was booked. Schroeder added other ways Pride has faced community opposition, noting, “It’s like chickens trying to peck you to death...one year [Pride faced opposition] it was because the school put Pride on their electronic bulletin board, along with other community events. Another year it was that some people rented the space we always hang our Pride banner [from] for the exact same time frame...there have always been these little things.” Still, over the years, community support is growing, and Schroeder estimates 80-90% of area residents are supportive of the celebration.



ECMN Pride Planning Committee at an early Pride event: <https://eastcentralminnesotapride.org/photos/>

In addition to ECMN Pride facing various forms of community opposition over the years, all three board members highlighted the challenge of succession planning for future Pride events. They noted that everyone on the board is aging, and they need younger people to partner with them and continue the work.

Board members also spoke more broadly to the challenges facing local LGBTQ+ rural residents. These included stigma; as Johnson put it, “It is still a big challenge for many people who are other than straight [and cisgender] in these areas to live their authentic lives. Society is moving forward to some extent, but there are competing forces that make it even harder, especially in rural places.” Schroeder added that recent policy efforts targeting transgender people compounds the stigma. Redpath voiced her concern that the current political environment will make people give up, when “it’s more important than ever to keep reminding people of why we do this.”

Still, there are many sources of hope for the LGBTQ+ community in rural Minnesota. For example, a number of year-round events now occur in Pine City and other towns in the five county region that board members attribute to the existence of ECMN Pride. Pride happens just once a year, from 12-5 PM on a Saturday in June, but now a local bar is hosting drag shows, an art center is hosting LGBTQ+ film screenings, and there seems to be a growing sentiment of excitement around these types of activities in the region. Along with local spin-off events, because of their longevity, ECMN Pride is a model for other small-town Prides. A former Pine City resident was responsible for bringing a Pride celebration to their new home in Pepin, Wisconsin, and organizers of Brainerd Lakes Pride had for years worked

with ECMN on their event. Now, there are eight to ten Pride celebrations going on in rural areas in Minnesota, in every corner of the state. ECMN Pride board members are hopeful that small-town Pride celebrations will continue to spread throughout the state and the region, and with them, a greater sentiment of support for the LGBTQ+ community.

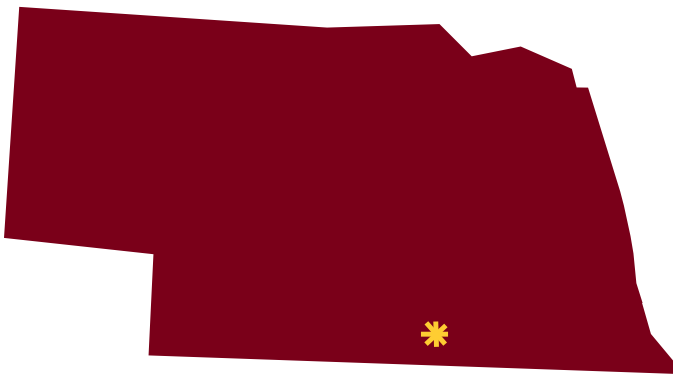
Case #2: Hastings PRIDE March and Festival

Rural Community Context

Hastings is home to approximately 25,000 Nebraskans, and is the county seat of Adams County.²⁷ Adams County is ranked in the lower mid-range (second lowest quartile) for health of counties in Nebraska with poorer quality of life measures and worse health behaviors compared to state averages.²⁸ Agriculture is the primary industry, and it is common to share the road with various farm equipment.²⁹ Hastings' largest employers are Thermo King (a producer of refrigerated transportation), WR Reserve (agriculture), and Dutton-Lainson (a manufacturer winches and trailer parts).³⁰

We spoke with the Director of Hastings PRIDE

Figure 2: Map of Nebraska showing Hastings, NE



March and Festival, Randy Kottwitz.

Organizational Overview

Hastings Pride began with a march in 2014, and continued as a loosely organized event until it was formalized in 2019 through the local Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) chapter. Affiliation with PFLAG gave Hastings Pride a 501(c)(3) designation, allowing them to raise funds and put together a larger celebration. In 2019, they hosted their first official Pride celebration. It was cancelled in 2020 due to COVID-19 but resumed in 2021.

Hastings Pride focuses on three main pillars: visibili-



Celebrations at Hastings PRIDE, courtesy of Randy Kottwitz. Videos of the [march](#) and [festival](#) also available.

ty, education, and celebration. They achieve these goals through several activities, including a march, speakers, vendors, parade of flags, and other entertainment. The event is very family-friendly with children's activities in a specific area including free face painting, and hopefully this year, a giant slide. Activities are almost all free for attendees, which Kottwitz said is a priority to make sure everyone can come and have fun without being strained financially.

While PFLAG organizations are typically a support organization, in Hastings and many other rural communities, a PFLAG chapter may be the only local LGBTQ+-specific organization and may take on a larger role. Most Hastings PFLAG members identify as LGBTQ+ themselves, and as the main sponsor of Pride, they try to appeal to a wide audience of local LGBTQ+ individuals and allies. Kottwitz spoke to this goal, saying, "We don't have much out here, the closest gay bar is Lincoln two hours away and there are a couple of private clubs that have drag nights every once in a while... but what we really try to provide in Pride is a gathering for the entire community."

As a 501(c)(3), Hastings Pride can raise funds to put together a more extensive celebration. The largest portion of funds comes from commercial sponsors. Hastings Pride also received a marketing grant from Nebraska tourism, which helped fund Facebook advertisements, and they have applied for other grants to help support the event. The remaining funds come from donations at the event. One current goal for Hastings Pride is to have a more comfortable budget to work with for future Pride celebrations.

Key Features

Kottwitz said the biggest success of Hastings Pride is bringing in the people. They are proud of the attendees they have attracted thus far and hope to con-

tinue growing. Their 2021 celebration drew about 300 people, and they hope to have around 500 in 2022. Kottwitz thinks they can reach about 1,000 attendees by increasing their marketing and getting additional sponsors. Another big success is the stories and positive feedback from attendees. Kottwitz recalled an email from a woman in her 50s who was at Pride with her partner for the first time, saying she could not stop grinning and it felt like she was stepping over a threshold into safety.

Kottwitz explained that with a top liberal arts private college, a large historical museum, a symphony, and other cultural staples, Hastings is a unique small town in central Nebraska. He hopes to draw on the artistic nature of the community to expand on Pride, perhaps by showing winners of the Prairie Pride Film Festival at the museum theater next to the park where Pride takes place and including a queer artist exhibit in the lobby of the museum during Pride month. He hopes this will help draw more attendees as well and “give people a reason to stick around.” He says that drag shows are actually easy to find in Central Nebraska and they are well done, but he wants to provide other types of entertainment as well.

Hastings Pride also depends on several vendors who provide their services at discounted (or free) rates. For example, a videographer came in 2021 to film the festival and charged them much less than her usual rates, and a sound engineer agreed to work at Pride for just

the price of his gas to get there.

Challenges and Opportunities

Kottwitz has been encouraged by the overall acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in his community. He praises the representation of LGBTQ+ residents in the area through queer-owned businesses and holding political positions of power. He said, “sometimes I think that’s the most heroic thing you can do in rural America, which is to just live the honest life, especially let the kids that are growing up around you see that it’s possible.” Further, he shared that his personal experience with regard to health care access has been positive; he feels like he has been treated with respect, and not experienced instances of discrimination.

Despite progress, there is an occasional incident of violence, harassment, or vandalism in the Hastings area. As a long-time activist for LGBTQ+ rights, Kottwitz says he is astonished by the progress that has happened in his lifetime, but it is difficult to be hopeful right now. Kottwitz noted that current judicial and legislative actions at the state and federal levels have him concerned about the future of LGBTQ rights. Additionally, Kottwitz says he thinks the biggest challenges for LGBTQ+ people is dealing with isolation during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and not having a sense of community. He says, “I think it’s doubled down for LGBT people and tripled down for older LGBT folk.”

Conclusion

Rural Pride celebrations can help to increase visibility for LGBTQ+ residents, and to promote a sense of social cohesion and belonging. Such efforts are important to improving social connectedness and well-being for rural LGBTQ+ residents who otherwise face intersecting health inequities on the basis of geography, sexual orientation, and gender identity.⁷ Feeling socially connected is essential to good health outcomes, and supporting efforts to increase one’s sense of connectedness and belonging is essential to improving population health.^{1,31} The examples in this case study series highlight ways that Pride celebrations are addressing connectedness and well-being for rural LGBTQ+ residents, and offer lessons for other communities looking to follow suit.

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Celebrations at Hastings PRIDE March and Festival, courtesy of Randy Kottwitz



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Suggested Citation

Tuttle M, Pick M, Libal R, and Henning-Smith C. Small-Town Pride Celebrations Supporting Social Connectedness and Well-Being for LGBTQ+ Rural Residents. *UMN Rural Health Research Center Policy Brief*. June 2022. <https://rhrc.umn.edu/publication/small-town-pride-celebrations-supporting-social-connectedness-well-being-for-lgbtq-rural-residents/>



Rural Health Research & Policy Centers

Funded by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy
www.ruralhealthresearch.org

Support for this study was provided by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, Health Resources and Services Administration, Cooperative Agreement U1CRH03717-13-00. The information, conclusions, and opinions expressed are those of the authors, and no endorsement by FORHP, HRSA, or HHS is intended or should be inferred.

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