

REGIONAL

Medford's first Pride festival lauded as a success despite small-scale pushback



by Lauren Rowello

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A vendor greets festival-goers at Medford Pride on July 15. (Photo: A - Z Photography)

Organizers estimate between 1000 and 1300 people flocked to Freedom Park in Medford, New Jersey on July 15 for an inaugural Pride festival — an event they believe is signaling change in the community despite small-scale protests from anti-LGBTQ+ gatherers.

“I could not have asked for it to turn out better,” said Ray Coxe — Medford’s first openly LGBTQ+ council member, who took office in January.

The event featured 40 vendors, live music, kids' activities, food trucks, and connections to much-needed resources such as housing support, voter registration, and affirming religious communities. There were also crafts and a mandala community art project. In the weeks leading up to the event, protestors vowed to host a rally at the same location to counter the festival. But less than ten people showed up.

A man positioned across a busy road — separated from the festival by trees — held signs with conservative takes on biblical teachings and yelled with a bullhorn about STDs. Less than a handful of people also engaged attendees in the parking lot, attempting to convince festival-goers not to attend or debating them on their way out.

At some point, a young teen rode through the festival on a bike yelling about Jesus. A few tweens awkwardly confronted at least two vendors with insistent comments about the love of Jesus — seemingly in an attempt at intimidation. But both incidents only lasted a few minutes and didn't seem to detract from the overall event. Many attendees didn't even notice.

"They seemed to want to poke the bear," said one vendor. "My general approach is to just meet this with kindness. It's probably going to make you angry because I'm not giving you the reaction you want — but with people like that, perspectives change little by little."

The vendor believes the young people deserve empathy — as their behavior likely reflects hateful or problematic perspectives of the adults in their lives. She hopes they left feeling curious about the kindness of the queer community.





Attendees enjoying Medford Pride at Freedom Park on July 15. (Photo: A - Z Photography)

Medford has made news the past few years because of [anti-LGBTQ+ efforts in the school district](#) and ongoing issues with [a lack of transparency](#) regarding inclusive curriculum.

Coxe believes those speaking out against LGBTQ+ rights and affirmation are a minority in town, however vocal and visible they try to be, especially online. Some Facebook posts about LGBTQ+ topics, for instance, can elicit hundreds of interactions — but many are from just a handful of accounts and users who have multiple online personas. This gives the appearance that there is a growing number of queerphobic locals, but Coxe said the reality is just a scare tactic deployed by a small group.

That doesn't mean Medford has always been affirming for Coxe. While campaigning for his council seat, cars sometimes slowed to yell slurs, but the good of the broader community outweighed those negative interactions for him.

He wants young people impacted by any of that negativity to know that there are more supportive people within the Medford community than ever before. Business leaders, school staffers, and now even a council member all have their backs.

“Don't let what those other people say hold you back,” he underlined.

Melissa, a lesbian who moved to Medford Lakes seven years ago after living in Pennsylvania for nearly 20 years, said the area hasn't been the easiest place to be out. She assumed people would be as open and

accepting as those she met in Philadelphia and Montgomery County but was surprised by the pushback she received when she suggested the school district and borough do something visible for Pride month. She was even booed at a 2022 school board meeting and told to sit down when she tried to call out transphobia.

She said this first Medford Pride event gives her hope for the future.

“What the organizers pulled off means far more than they may ever realize,” she said. “I hope it’s just the start of fostering more love and acceptance here.”

Pola Galie, who owns Lower Forge Brewery in downtown Medford and first launched the idea for the event, initially hoped to plan a community picnic. Galie’s friends encouraged her to think bigger. Then Coxe realized the event could make a statement.

“Medford is changing,” said Coxe. “Demographics of the town are changing, and I want people to realize that Medford is not, for lack of a better word, closed off. Medford is a diverse community and a welcoming community. My goal was to show that Medford is changing — and, to me, changing for the better.

“Regardless of what may have been or what you may have heard in the past, we’re trying to push beyond that now and turn the page on that — close that chapter,” he emphasized.

Medford hasn’t ever historically celebrated Pride at a townwide level. A few years ago, one resident attempted to launch “Pride on Main” — a downtown series of events and happenings that didn’t quite catch on. Those who reflected on those efforts noted that COVID and various other challenges got in the way.

Galie, who is 73, believed a picnic was a lowkey opportunity to connect likeminded people. She picked Wednesday because it’s her night off of work — and even though the event became a full festival, to her it just felt like a giant community picnic. She was thrilled to see so many teens and young adults and told PGN that many parents and families thanked her after the event for creating a space where young people could be celebrated and connect.

Kristin, who volunteered on the day of the event alongside her daughter who was the event photographer, was especially impressed with the visible support organizers received from local government including the Medford Police Department, which [posted to social media celebrating the event’s success](#), as well as Assemblyperson Anthony Angelozzi, who spoke to volunteers about the importance of diversity and inclusion.

“There is a lot of inclusion in the schools and community,” said Kristin, an ally who is the parent of two teens

including one who is LGBTQ+. “Kids find community and find others who relate to them, and they support each other. They feel comfortable together.”

She said having a Pride event in town signals to young people that there is a strong local community who wants to ensure LGBTQ+ kids are accepted, safe, and supported. She also valued that the event showed young people that they are not alone.

Three budding artisans — ages 12 through 16 — enjoyed when adults came up to them at their table to ensure they felt welcomed. Adler, a vendor who sold handpoured candles, especially loved seeing allies they wouldn’t have automatically perceived to be so genuinely supportive.

They were also excited about new resources and opportunities — including a local teen meet-up, larping group, and camp.

Emerson — who sold earrings, slime, and bracelets — said her Pride themed merch sold best. Neither of them were bothered by the protests. They heard occasional bullhorn comments — which urged them to repent — but laughed at attempts to change them.

Lemon — who sold clay magnets, watercolor prints, and stickers — spent time scoping outfits and made some new friends.





Emerson and Lemon at their merch table.

“I don’t usually like people,” joked Emerson, who said meeting new people is never a goal but that she enjoyed hanging out with friends and being around people she could relate to. She also liked seeing so many older people — especially confident, happy couples. It felt like a glimpse into her own future.

The event was “totally tubular,” she laughed.