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Northampton swells with Pride celebration

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NORTHAMPTON #- Despite a float malfunction, 26-year-old University of Massachusetts graduate student Ilke Ercani was all smiles after her first march at what might have been a record-setting Pride parade and rally in the city's downtown Saturday.

Shortly following the parade that kicked off Northampton's 29th Pride celebration, which is believed to have set an attendance record. Ercani, a native of Turkey, reunited at a streetside bench with several of her classmates, who traveled from the Amherst campus and lined the march's route in support of their gay friend and the event's cause.

While no official estimate on the crowd size was available, people familiar with past Pride events say Saturday's gathering appeared to draw up to 5,000 more people than usual.

"It was awesome. Against all odds, we just marched. Nothing can rain on our parade," said Ercani, who walked with members of UMass' Stonewall Center after the group's float lost power when a car battery died moments before they joined the noontime procession from Lampron Park to the parking lot behind Thornes Marketplace for a rally featuring music, speakers and dancing.

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JERREY ROBERTS

A group from Greenfield Center School walks down Crafts Avenue today during the annual Pride march in Northampton. The 29th year for the event saw an impressive turnout that exceeded recent years, observers say.

"We're all here to support our friends," said UMass graduate student Mandy Brule, 24, of North Adams after she and her friends draped a sash over Ercani that read "Birthday Princess."

Under blue, sunny skies with temperatures nearing the mid-80s, the largest crowd ever -- a mix of gay, lesbian bisexual, transgender, straight and queer of all ages -- descended on Northampton's center to cheer on the annual parade typically held on the first Saturday in May. Surrounded in a sea of bright- and rainbow-colored clothing and paraphernalia, the May 1 gathering was also the earliest the day-long festivities have taken place.

In past years, attendance has averaged around 10,000, according to event organizers.

"I've never seen it this big before," said Northampton Police Officer Michael McLaughlin, who is in his fourth year working the event. "It's unreal."

The role of the annual gay pride parade in Northampton has changed over the years, becoming as much a celebration as it is a political action.

Revived this year, a "Dyke March" was held Friday night at the Unitarian Society of Northampton and Florence and other pride events continued into the afternoon and evening hours Saturday.

Boyfriends of five years, Daniel Bates, 27, and Tyler Ramos, 30, journeyed from their hometown in Wilbraham for their third visit in four years to Northampton's Pride day.

"We're just excited to have somewhere where we can have pride," said Bates. "We knew driving up here that there would be a lot of support. It's fantastic to see."

Sixteen-year-old Elizabeth McGrath, also of Wilbraham, said she enjoyed her first visit to the parade.

"As an out bisexual, I wanted to see what it was all about," she said.

Dawning angel wings and short shorts, two shirtless men who marched with a banner representing the Sisters of Boston, a social and support group primarily for male-to-female cross dressers and transgendered people, posed with other attendees for photos at the rally afterward.

"I've never been before, so it was a great feeling and a lot of fun," said Chris Delacruz, 22, of Somerville, in his first visit to the Pride parade.

"It was awesome," added 42-year-old David Aparicio, also of Somerville, who is Delacruz's roommate's boyfriend. "The best part was the power of the attention that the sisters could grab here."

Although there have been some recent victories for gay rights, including a federal mandate to extend visitation and medical decision-making rights to same-sex couples and the legalization of same-sex marriage in five states, including Massachusetts, Iowa and Vermont, inequality for gay people persists.

Not all states allow gay and lesbian couples to adopt children, for example, and the federal government does not prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, according to the Human Rights Campaign, an LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) rights organization.

The first gay pride parades were held in 1970 to commemorate the Stonewall Riot in New York City, which went on to spark the gay rights movement. Pride parades are now held annually in many major metropolitan centers.

For more information on the parade, visit www.nohopride.org.

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