

Standing OUT

Shayla Adkins found her place in Portland's LGBTQ community – but she wasn't always forthcoming about her sexuality. Now, her Ms. Gay Pride crown leaves no doubt.

BY EMILLY PRADO
STAFF WRITER

Shayla Adkins was beaming in the bathroom line at The Trap in Southeast Portland, straightening the crown atop her head when she caught my eye. With a shiny sash that read, “Ms. Gay Pride,” the newly minted pageant queen proudly belted Lady Gaga’s “Born this Way” into the wee hours of karaoke night. She divulged that in addition to the evening marking her Pride Northwest Pageant victory, she was also celebrating officially coming out.

Since moving to Portland from the conservative Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, in 2014, Adkins has grown immensely. She spent her first year in the City of Roses trying to find her place and, still reeling from heartbreak after things ended with a longtime girlfriend, she found solace during that time in partying. Two days after her first anniversary in Portland, she quit drinking cold turkey and has been sober ever since.

Changing cities was a way to move past the breakup and give herself room to grow. After getting sober, she enrolled in the School of Social Work at Portland State University and has juggled college coursework with jobs as a bartender and a KJ, or karaoke DJ.

Although it took a bit of time, she eventually found a sense of community and safety within LGBTQ spaces in Portland. It was this encouragement from her friends that gave her the courage to try her hand at the Pride Northwest Pageant – her first since participating in a Junior Miss competition in high school. It’s also the reason she opted to sing Foreigner’s “Feels Like the First Time” during the talent segment.

Leading up to the pageant, she made a point of reminding her parents several times that she had entered. While she had told her parents that her roommate prior to the move had actually been her girlfriend and they expressed their support, further conversations about her sexuality in the years since proved tricky and often required tip-toeing around the issue, especially with her father and extended family.

But being crowned Ms. Gay Pride and sharing these photos widely on Facebook provided an avenue to bravely rip off the Band-Aid once and for all.

“It’s been on my heart a lot,” Adkins said. “I kind of was out, I guess, but I didn’t feel like it. A part of me did want to scream it at the top of my lungs, but I wanted to be really tactful and I didn’t want to shove it into anyone’s face.”

Her roommate’s boyfriend encouraged her to enter, and she figured if she won, it would



PHOTO BY CASSIE JOHNSON

Shayla Adkins is crowned Ms. Gay Pride.

PRIDE NORTHWEST

Portland Pride Waterfront Festival

When: Noon-8 p.m. Saturday, June 17; 11:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday, June 18

Where: Tom McCall Waterfront Park

Cost: \$7 donation

For more Pride events this weekend, go to pridenw.org/events/

Portland Pride Parade

When: 11 a.m.-1 p.m. Sunday, June 18

Where: From West Burnside and Northwest Park Avenue, through Old Town, to Tom McCall Waterfront Park

settle the question about her sexuality without having to explain it.

“I don’t have to say, ‘OK everybody, I’m gay,’ and have to figure out the words. I get to post a picture of me with a gay pride sash on and everyone’s going to figure it out.”

Now that she’s won, she’s committed to maximizing her year as the Ms. Gay Pride titleholder. She’ll be making appearances and creating more connections within the community by promoting events and opportunities, and planning playful fundraisers for local LGBTQ nonprofits.

Adkins said the community has been welcoming as she navigates her sobriety. The first six months of sobriety required gauging her mood constantly. But, she said, “it’s been pretty cool because going to events like pageants or drag shows, the focal point isn’t alcohol or partying. It gives more depth when you have more of a reason to go than just getting messed up with friends. You’re there for a cause. It’s self-fulfillment on top of just hanging out.”

Moving forward, she said, she wants to build on this support, and incorporate certain projects into the sober community.

As for the future of the LGBTQ community in Portland, she’d like to see further outreach for the families of LGBTQ youth and general public.

“It would be really beneficial for us, as a community, to have more support for (LGBTQ) kids, but also information for parents and reaching out before LGBTQ kids become homeless,” she said.

She views this as a crucial tool for intervention.

“The suicide rate is really high for LGBTQ youth, especially (in the) transgender community,” she said, “and I think that all of the stigma that comes along with being LGBTQ is not because of being gay or having gender dysphoria or whatever, but it’s (because of) other people’s reactions.”

Adkins hopes that this Pride weekend, people will consider attending the festivities, whether for the first time or the 10th. The celebration holds a special place in her heart.

“The very first time I found a sense of belonging and comfort in the middle of chaos. I felt safe and like a puzzle piece,” she said. “I used to be really scared and confused and came from a really conservative place. So I just hope that if people go to Pride or they see Pride, they are inspired and keep an open mind and advocate for the next generation of new, young, confused people that will be there.”