Why LGBTQ Pride Festivals Are Becoming Black Lives Matter Protests



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Key insights:

When the Covid-19 pandemic began, most LGBTQ celebrations were canceled. But with protests across the world this week drawing attention to police brutality and the systemic racism facing the Black community, many of the organizations behind Pride festivals are re-engaging their plans and pivoting to join the protest movement.

“Pride has always been a protest, and over time has become a celebration as well,” said David Correa, interim executive director at Heritage of Pride, the nonprofit that organizes each year’s massive NYC Pride celebration as well as ongoing community events and fundraising efforts throughout the year.

New York’s Pride march started officially in 1970 as Christopher Street Liberation Day, a protest march that

commemorated the one-year anniversary of the riots at the Stonewall Inn. Throughout the 1960s, police regularly harassed and raided gay bars—arresting trans women and butch lesbians, among others, for the "crime" of wearing clothes designated for the opposite gender.

The night of the Stonewall uprising, the West Village LGBTQ community had finally had enough. They fought back, throwing bricks and other objects at police, and the riot spilled over into several days of standoffs between the police and queer and trans New Yorkers.

Each year since, LGBTQ Pride falls on the day of the Stonewall uprising, June 28. But over the course of 50-odd years, the event has evolved from an anti-police riot into a massive public celebration, with corporate brand sponsorship totaling millions of dollars. Until Covid-19.

For many Pride festivals, this year already presented a shift in priorities overall as corporate diversity funding was pulled back during the pandemic, leaving organizers to rethink the purpose of their events. NYC Pride, for example, has one of the most robust sponsorship portfolios of any LGBTQ event—with T-Mobile and Mastercard leading donations, and dozens of partners including Hyatt, Omnicom Group, United Airlines and Target. But this year, some of its corporate partners have had to renegotiate their pledged donations while others—like the travel industry—had to pull out of the event because their bottom line had been hit hard.

"It's been a difficult year in general," Correa said. "Making pivots like this is not easy. Luckily, we have great partners that have stayed the course; some have had to reduce their gives, some have been able to maintain."

Correa said a big part of the financial blow to Pride this year is the shift away from live events, where NYC Pride typically makes a good portion of its profits on ticket sales.

Correa said those sales usually go to fund events like Youth Pride and other community support efforts. This year's festival will be virtual and free to all.

Bringing 'those on the margins' to center stage

NYC Pride had already signed up Ashlee Marie Preston and Brian Michael Smith, both Black trans media personalities, in 2019 to host this year's festival as co-emcees. But making the announcement this week felt especially impactful.

On Monday, Keyonna "Iyanna Dior" Kamry, a 20-year-old trans woman of color, was badly beaten by a crowd of men in Minneapolis, sparking a discussion about LGBTQ inclusion that followed on the heels of a Black trans man, Tony McDade, being killed by police in Florida, then misgendered in press accounts of the incident. Between the global protests over George Floyd's killing by police, the handling of McDade's death and the horrifying beating of Kamry in a video that went viral, the LGBTQ community seems to be talking about racial justice and transgender safety more than ever before.

And, as Preston pointed out, LGBTQ Pride started as a protest movement largely ignited by two trans women of color: Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. Preston said hosting NYC Pride 2020 feels "ancestral."

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