

Celebration and Protest

AUGUST 12, 2019

Activist Sophie Nevin '18 helped organize the town of Bennington's first annual Pride celebration.



While growing up in Tacoma, WA, Sophie Nevin '18 was involved with activism for the queer community. In high school, she participated in the [Rainbow Center](#)'s teen group, providing education and advocacy for young members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and allied (LGBTQA) community.

"I grew up involved in queer activism, but I wasn't out until college," said Nevin.

After living on the West coast and attending Bennington College, Nevin felt more comfortable expressing her identity.

"At Bennington, I studied Dance Composition, Neuroscience, and Queer Theory," said Nevin, who combined these interests in her senior work, wherein she interviewed openly queer professional dancers about how those roles influence their practice.

"In some participants, I found that gender identity played a role in the kind of dance they were comfortable making as professionals," said Nevin. "Many of

the dancers had taken ballet, but the gender queer artists weren't as comfortable performing in that rigid dance space, whereas all of the cis participants were still working in ballet. I found that form and content overlapped."

Shortly after graduating from Bennington College and moving into the local town of Bennington, however, Nevin found that she missed connecting with other queer people.

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Sophie Nevin '18

"I felt safe, but I didn't have anyone to talk to about queer issues unless I went back to campus," said Nevin. "At a certain point in conversations, I was always wary, thinking to myself, 'Can I come out to this person? Should I not?'"

On Facebook, Nevin had joined the [Vermont Activist Network](#) upon recommendation from a coworker's mother, who suggested it as a resource for getting involved locally. One day on her lunch break, Nevin scrolled past a post from Lisa Carton, founder of [Queer Connect](#), who was in the process of organizing Bennington's first pride weekend.

"Lisa had posted that she needed volunteers, and I just happened to scroll past," said Nevin.

Nevin, who had previously volunteered with Tacoma pride, emailed Carton offering to help. After attending a planning meeting, she found herself eager to jump in.

"We spent about a month and a half working on publicity for pride," said Nevin. "I spent hours writing and emailing people, which was a nice change because I'm usually exhausted after work. Having the chance to go home, sit down, and be able to help with pride made me feel less drained."

Bennington pride, which took place June 28-30, 2019, was planned to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. To Carton and Nevin, the timing felt right to bring more visibility to Bennington's queer community.

"Lisa has lived in Bennington for more than 25 years and has felt comfortable and safe, but it's not a particularly open community: not a lot of queer people know others are here," said Nevin. "And I wanted kids growing up here, who might stay here, to see that community and feel safer and normal."

For many in the queer community, pride events provide both a "celebration and a protest."

"The world right now is chaotic," said Nevin. "Though there aren't as many detractors in town as there are queer people and allies, those detractors are vocal, and they make daily life scarier. Pride is an opportunity to say, 'You might be loud, but we can be louder,' while promoting safety and love."

Over the course of the weekend, Bennington celebrated pride with all-ages, substance-free events. From a drag show to a Bennington Museum queer art exhibition, a parade to a coming-out storytelling session, a significant cross-section of community members showed up at events to engage, learn, and connect.

"What I was most excited about was how vast the age group was," said Nevin. "I had a conversation with a woman in her eighties, and I met middle schoolers. Having the weekend be substance-free made a huge difference; it meant the whole community could be at every event. Everyone came together to have a great experience."

As Queer Connect grows its presence in Bennington, the group hopes to keep the momentum going with summer camps and pride events throughout the year.

For current Bennington College students considering staying in the town after graduation, Nevin recommends participating in local activities.

"You have to find things to do by reading the Bennington Bulletin or checking the Four Corners kiosk downtown," said Nevin. "Once I took a writing class at the library and joined a book club, my experience started to change. Even if you meet a small group of people, that's more than you knew before."

Adjusting to life in a small town, said Nevin, involves making “a routine of putting yourself out there.”

“Day to day, it’s easy to not see people if you’re busy with work, but try to find something to join,” said Nevin. “A year ago, I didn’t feel connected with the community at all, and now I do. That’s a huge change.”

By Natalie Redmond, Associate Writer