

In depth

Inside...

- 06.... Colm Tóibín on the secrets and allure of the boglands
- 10.... The film that sparked the Burton and Taylor legend



- 12.... Kelly Jones on how his children played a part in forming his new band
- 20.... Ten tips on how to put your phone away



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at Navan's St Patrick's Day Parade. Photo by Rafal Wojcicki

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We feared a backlash... but Navan proved how progressive it really is

An organiser of his Meath hometown's first Pride parade, **Patrick Lawlor** reports on how attitudes have changed, local solidarity in the wake of an attack on a schoolboy and why this month of celebration remains so important

You want me to what now, hai?" says Joe Heaney, his brow furrowed, half-inquisitive, half-startled. He picked up the "hai" when he lived in north Leitrim for a few years, but he's a Navan man through and through. He has been confused for Tommy Tierman in the past and is a fixture of the town. He has a great big beard and innocent, kind eyes. He is a dear friend and is loved by so many in the town, particularly in our bohemian local, Lockie's. It's here that I am persuading him to join the first ever Navan Pride parade, which I am helping to organise.

"So will you walk in the parade then?" I press. "All right, sure," he replies, without batting an eyelid.

Then, as I scrutinise the nearly 2ft tapestry of charcoal and black that is his beard, I get a brainwave.

"Joe, I have an idea. Will you dye the beard rainbow colours?"

Wide-eyed, as is his wont when a surprise is sprung on him: "What?!" he gasps.

"Yeah, Joe, I can see it now, it'll work."

There is a bit of toing and froing about. Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dream-Beard, but his semi-exasperation soon slips away with a few sighs as I ask again and again. I can be a persistent sort.

"All right then, I'll dye the beard, Paddy." "Thanks, Joe," I say, offering an excited hug. We mosey to the beer garden.

"To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance," said Oscar Wilde. The modern-day equivalent is: "If you can't love yourself, then how in the hell are you gonna love somebody else?" That, of course, is the drag queen RuPaul. Both sentiments are apt when it comes to coming out and accepting one's sexuality or gender identity. It's a very hard process.

My early 20s were a dark time for me mentally, and I wouldn't doubt that grappling with one's sexuality has claimed many, many lives on this island. One glance at the most famous dating app for men, Grindr, will tell you that there

are quite a lot of men in this country who are still not comfortable with being themselves. Some may argue that having a secret sex life is a choice and that they are being themselves. But can it really be the case that *all* of the men behind blank profiles are happy about keeping their sexuality under wraps? I think not.

And it's not just the so-called "closeted" who suffer from negative attitudes to LGBTQ+ issues. People who are "out" still watch their Ps and Qs around certain people for fear of name-calling, general nastiness or even violence. It's sad to say that, yes, in my hometown of Navan I have been the target of homophobic comments. I went to an all-boys' school where gay slurs were bandied about daily by fellow pupils. I think even I was guilty of a few "that's gay" comments as a kid.

It was just before my 21st birthday when I took the leap to come out to friends and family. It's become easier over the years. We got marriage equality in 2015. Navan returned a majority Yes vote and I'm grateful to all those who saw sense back then, but the LGBTQ+ people of this bustling commuter town are by no means out of the woods.

There was an attack in our town last month on a young person that was filmed and shared far and wide. It made national and a few international headlines. In response, the Navan Pride committee wanted to react to what garaf described as a hate crime and to show solidarity with the victim. However, we were careful not to use something so horrific as a vehicle for our own celebration, so we attended a Meath Rally Against Hate that was hastily organised but still attracted a swell of support from the townsfolk. Members of our committee worked hard to create a banner at the last minute. Our message was not just about condemning just anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment, but all kinds of hate.

Homophobia, like transphobia and xenophobia, is still very much alive and indeed worsening in recent years, as we can see from a sinister online cohort. Last year, two businesses in the town that were brave enough to display support for Pride Month received vicious abuse via email from the few nasties with a warped agenda. This sort of thing has become commonplace. The nasties conflate LGBTQ+ with paedophilia and show no compassion for people struggling with their identities.

Just the other evening, during a brilliantly

Show of support: The Meath Rally Against Hate march through Navan last month. Photo by Steve Humphreys

attended pub quiz fundraiser we organised, a rainbow flag I was flying from my flat's balcony was ripped down by two individuals. There is footage of it, and the irony of one man mounting another to grab their fabulous rainbow-coloured prize wasn't lost on me.

At the outset of our Navan Pride project, back in January, we feared that a rising anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment could affect the support we would receive from the town's businesses. But we misjudged how progressive Navan is. Overall, 90pc of local businesses have shown support by either agreeing to display a poster or flag, offering sponsorship or providing gifts and vouchers for our fundraisers. This, again, has swelled our hearts. The support has been phenomenal.

The dress rehearsal for the "dream beard" was the Navan St Patrick's Day parade. We were invited to take part thanks to two councillors from opposing parties. Sinn Féin's Eddie Fennessy told Cllr Pádraig Fitzsimons of Fianna Fáil about there being a Navan Pride, and the latter invited us to take part.

The days before the rehearsal are a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Members of the committee, young and old, Joe Heaney and me included, work on a banner. It starts off well. There are rainbows and hearts and it looks good. Niall, the manager of Lockie's — officially

The irony of one man mounting another to tear down my fabulous rainbow-coloured flag from my balcony wasn't lost on me'

Henry Loughran's, a 135-year-old bastion of socialising in the town — let us use space in the pub to work on the banner. Niall, a tall, long-haired 30-something, took over the running of the pub during lockdown and turned it into a buzzy place that attracts characters of all shapes, colours, creeds and dispositions. Kind of heart, studious and generous of spirit, he is also Navan Pride's treasurer. Like Joe, he is not gay. He's just open-minded and progressive.

Without him, we would not have Navan Pride. Last summer, as he was painting a mural for the now-annual Lockie's art competition, I approached gingerly to ask if he would put on something for a potential Navan Pride next summer. I could see the cogs turning in his head for about seven seconds before he agreed to it. Put on the spot by a gay regular, I guess it was difficult for him to say no, but he had plenty of valid reasons to decline.

Skip forward almost a year and following yes after yes to every request, I know he is a genuine supporter of our festival. In the wet and cold first weeks of January, Niall offered a section of the pub for committee meetings. He then agreed to be treasurer, doing tedious paperwork and meeting credit union officials. Then came the



Speaking out: Patrick Lawlor at the Rally Against Hate



offer of hosting a speed-quizzing night and gig for the festival, taking place from June 26 to July 1.

On day two of working on the banner, two handsome fellows join us. I think they distract me because I completely misjudge the all-important "Navan Pride" lettering, with the "Navan" bit too big and the "Pride" part squished out to the edge. The hard work of the first day's artists, Rebekah Brennan, Danielle de Jong, Joe, Michelle and co, has been completely undone by my rushing. Some of us try to console ourselves by saying: "Ah, it isn't that bad." It is.

Thankfully, Clare Nugent, the co-chair of Navan Pride, and Mima, our social media co-ordinator, save the day. Clare is another well-known Navanite. She is flame-haired, sassy and a fixture on the local gig circuit. The ballast to my sometimes-swaying boat, she is sensible and rational. Throughout the months of planning, she is the ideal co-chair, acting as confidante, organiser and much more. During an evening after work, she heads to Lockie's to right my wrong and paints a simple rainbow flag banner by herself. Mima, a Slovakian artist and bar worker in the Central (another venue supporting Pride from the start), brings her artistic flair to the occasion the next day and sorts out the lettering and signage.

With the paint just dried, the day arrives. We're ready. One member tells me: "The last time I was in a parade

in Navan, it was for the Corpus Christi." Rebekah uses a special resin dye to weave the "dream beard" on Joe. His look is completed by a rainbow Stetson that I supply. Dee, our parade manager, provides the big, flowy rainbow flags.

The two distracting handsome fellows have matching pink flashing hats and I wear a multi-coloured top. The whistles and flags are handed out and 10 of us and a dog set out for the parade start point on a typically sodden and blustery St Patrick's Day.

I carry the banner with Mima, and Joe and his beard lead us with a flag. Clare and I urge the troops to wave and whistle. I see friends and family along the route, and I almost tear up at one point. Danielle has a rainbow mohawk and looks in her element with the Pride dog up front. We're wedged between a Panda refuse truck and the Legion of Mary. And while we can't count our blessings for the weather, there is solidarity.

On the lined streets, we get cheers and applause at several sections. Our collective hearts swell. The odd scowl and shake of the head don't dampen our spirits in the driving rain. By the end of it, our banner, listing on my side as the far-stronger Mima forges on, is a dripping rainbow melange that has splodged on to us.

Nevertheless, we have done it. Navan has got its first taste of Pride and, by all accounts, we were the highlight, brightening up an otherwise drab and dreary day.

Joe becomes a minor celebrity, his vibrant

beard brightening up the pages of the *Meath Chronicle* and social media. "That was great, hai" are his words later that evening.

Afterwards, he says the whole experience gave him a sense of what it is like to be LGBTQ+. "Overall it was great and most people were fine, but there was one or two shaking their heads at me," he says, "and that did give me an idea of what it's like for gay people."

This is only one part of the story of Navan's first Pride. The idea was seeded last summer by Samba Band supremo Dee and Eddie Fennessy, the then mayor. In January, we had our first meeting and about 18 people turned up. By April, the numbers in our WhatsApp group had grown to more than 80.

There are many on the committee who deserve mention here but I don't have the space for all of them. There's John, our secretary and hardest worker by a country mile; another non-LGBTQ+ ally whose support we would be lost without. There's Stephanie (social media scheduling), Stephen (graphics), Peter (our website), Michelle and Jenni (our TikTok aficionados), Tracey from the Central (organising our drag bingo night on June 30).

Damien, a Lockie's local, helped to provide us with our logo thanks to the amazing talents of his young daughter Carly. They are now plastered on our banners, T-shirts, badges, posters, flyers and our website.

The talented local artist Gail Gildea drew an amazing artwork featuring the Seven Arches bridge with each arch a colour of the rainbow. It now hangs proudly in Lockie's pub. The image is framed by a heart, and it became a striking emblem during our anti-hate rally, which was among the top items on the evening news.

The Solstice Arts Centre is another strong supporter from the outset, showing LGBTQ+ films throughout the week of Pride and hosting our Breaking Down Barriers talk on June 29.

Another heartening development from the Navan Pride journey has been our collaboration with SOSAD (Save Our Sons and Daughters) Ireland, which does amazing work in helping people who suffer mental health difficulties, LGBTQ+ people included.

While we have immense support, I know of some naysayers who wonder "why can't there be a straight Pride?" and "why do they have to shove it down our throats?". My answer to that is to say pride conquers shame. There are men and women in this town and in towns all around the country who are still ashamed because of their sexuality. Are heterosexuals ever made to feel shame for their sexuality? We all know the answer is no.

There are still LGBTQ+ people living secret lives, ashamed to be open and watching what they say, how they say it and giving away that aspect of who they are.

It may be quixotic of me, but until the day that not a single LGBTQ+ person has to feel even a hint of shame for who they are, then there will be a need for Pride celebrations.

The last year has taught me that we are stronger together. So I ask that you embrace your LGBTQ+ family. Your friends. Your neighbours. Your doctors. Your builders. Your sport-people. They are just like you, but they don't quite feel like you.

The story of Navan Pride has truly been the support from the locals (most of them non-LGBTQ+), from artists, performers, businesses, carpenters, graphic designers, florists, you name it. To quote the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*: "It's astounding!"

Ahead of the Navan Pride Festival, I can say I'm extremely proud of the people in my hometown who have supported us.

I hope that after our parade and festival is over, I will feel even prouder.

● Navan Pride Festival starts on Monday, June 26. Visit navanpride.ie