

# Free To Be You and Me – Southern Oregon Pride Festival



LocalsGuide - Ashland, Oregon

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I had a moment of insight recently in which I had a great realization. The realization is that you don't heal the past by trying to go back and rehash it. You heal the future by stepping into it, and taking new and bold actions that create fresh and positive opportunities!

Gina DuQuenne steps into this future by once again bringing Ashland to life with Southern Oregon's third annual Pride Parade and Pride Celebration. I was able to speak with Gina and talk to her about this year's theme "Free To Be You and Me" and the upcoming events.

**Gina, thanks so much for speaking with me today. Let's talk about this year's theme "Free to Be You And Me".**

The theme was born out of the horrific bullying over the last couple of years. To me it's unfathomable that acceptance is not a way of life....the acceptance of each individual no matter one's skin color, their religion, who they love...we all have the right to the American dream.

**Will you tell us a little bit about this inspiration?**

One evening I was channel hopping looking for a good movie and ran across "A GIRL LIKE ME". Even though I have seen it before, I decided to watch it. Just like the first time I saw it, I was deeply moved by this sad story. It was in that moment of anguish for this beautiful young woman's family that the inspiration for "FREE TO BE YOU AND ME" was born.

**Let's talk about the "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". What does this exactly mean and how do we as a community, and nation continue to actualize this as we grow into the 21st century?**

Our constitution gives us these inalienable rights as Americans for Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of happiness. It doesn't say we can pick and choose who gets what rights and who is allowed to pursue happiness. There are so many liberties that have not been allowed to so many people.

It is my fervent belief that we can begin to heal this misunderstanding of one another by starting **THE CONVERSATION**. If each and every one of us began asking and answering questions about our lifestyles, our families and our passions, we would begin to realize there are little differences in who we are at our core. This, in my opinion, holds true of all differences, whether they be race, religion, creed and even politics. We are all, basically the same. It is our ego-oriented perspectives that begin to create and build wedges between people.

Until we have marriage equality, the pursuit of happiness is a fantasy. SO Pride is committed to educating and enlightening our community. As a Nation it is up to each individual to open up their hearts and their minds to the pursuit of happiness for everyone.

**Southern Oregon Pride is not just about being lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans-gendered, but more about celebrating the diversity of people as a whole. Will you share more about this and your invitation to our community to participate in the upcoming events? Why should people come out and participate, even if they are not part of the LGBTQ community. What does this symbolize and thus create?**

First of all, let me clear that it isn't just about Sexual Preference. SO Pride welcomes the entire community to join in and march with us on Saturday, October 13<sup>th</sup>, for *everyone's* basic rights because it's really about diversity and everyone's individual constitutional right to express who they are. Unfortunately, there are so many derogatory names floating around to describe our community, one of which is the word "queer", so I give you this for thought. According to the Webster Dictionary, there are a number of meanings which include: astonishing, perplexing, curious, funny, unexpected and remarkable just to name a few.

We invite all people to march with us. We welcome and encourage people to ask questions, get to know us, get to know who we are. You may discover you actually like who we are!

**You have always had a broader vision and dream for how people can relate and interact with one another. Will you share a little bit with us?**

As a woman of color, I am occasionally faced with adversity from someone who is meeting me for the first time. My motto is "just keep talking and smiling". An angry-face reaction when someone scowls at me for who or what they think I am, will not get me anywhere. I learned as a very young girl the way to win someone over is to just keep talking and smiling. More often than not, I will eventually win them over. And if I don't, I know the seed has been planted and that someone else will one day reap the benefit of the wondrous seed that has been planted. Taking the attitude "screw you" when faced with prejudice will never give that person the opportunity to embrace you for who you are.

It is unfortunate, that often we are met with resistance because of who we are, or who we are perceived to be. My vision is for people everywhere to start having "THE CONVERSATION". Make a point of getting to know someone who is different from you. If we do that across the country, it is my heart-felt belief that we will all eventually find common ground free of hate and critical judgment.

It is important that people embrace their differences, share their differences and have an open mind and heart to see and accept the differences of others.

**In your own personal experience... why in the 21st century it is even more important to follow the advice you were given to just keep talking so people can know who you really are?**

In today's world, we have social media, Youtube and so many more venues for people to express their derogatory views and spew so much hate mongering, it is more important than ever for people to rise above this behavior. It is vitally important to show people who have preconceived deprecating ideas of who we are that we are, in fact, normal, loving, productive people. It is our responsibility to rise above this inflammatory response and show our true loving colors.

**This year's event begins with a documentary about Gwen Araujo, the trans-gendered teen who was murdered in Newark, California and featured in the movie "A Girl Like Me". Gwen's mom Sylvia Guerrero has traveled to Ashland and will be hosting the Q&A in the Meese Auditorium at Southern Oregon University after the documentary. Will you tell us more about this?**

Sylvia Guerrero is our Honorary Grand Marshal this year and let me just say that she is my hero! She speaks for those whose lives have been unjustly taken ... snuffed off the face of the earth just because they were, in a word, "different". As I mentioned earlier, the movie about Gwen was my inspiration for this year's theme.

Sylvia's trans-gendered daughter, Gwen, was taken away from her and her family before her life even began. The four boys who murdered her had been her "friends" until they discovered she was trans-gendered. Now Gwen is one of our angels as are so many young people who have died from suicide, or have been murdered at the hands of ignorant, uninformed people living in fear of "differences".....It is my fervent prayer that these lost lives will not be in vain.

Being different is not a punishable offense. It begs the question, why are so many so fearful of, and intimidated by, someone who is different!? Being different is not contagious! Where is the justification in taking the life of someone who is being True to who they are, their authentic selves.

**Moving on to a happier note, on Friday October 12th the Southern Oregon's Pride Celebration will be held... please tell?**

We party at the Historic Ashland Armory. DJs Hope and Gimeneye with KISS-FM will be bumping the beat. We have a cash bar, hosted hors d'oeuvres, live entertainment with our amazing Drag Show. Tickets are on sale now at Paddington Station.

Saturday October 13<sup>th</sup> is our parade which starts at 11:00am. We are honored to have Kate Brown Secretary of State for our Grand Marshal this year. We will march in solidarity on Main Street to the band shell in Lithia Park where we will have local live entertainment, vendor and food booths.

This is our third annual Celebration. It was an over-the-top success the first two years, and we expect the same and more this year. It's important to note that we had a substantial attendance by not only the LGBTQ community but the "straight" community as well!

**How do you see Southern Oregon Pride changing the future of Southern Oregon and what is the opportunity that we have at hand to help shape this future?**

Southern Oregon has already changed! SOPride has brought forth awareness to many who had little or no understanding of the diversity within this wonderful community. SOPride brings

additional tourism to Ashland. We have opened the door to many groups that have not previously considered Ashland as a vacation destination.

In our book stores, we now have a plethora of books that welcome the modern family and alternative lifestyles. More and more organizations existing in Southern Oregon have signed on in visible support of diversity.

I must mention that our Pride Event has brought participants and attendance from areas outside of Ashland as far away as Iowa.

**You have great support from the community in launching the annual event. In particular Mayor Stromberg and the city counselors**

Indeed we have! We would be remiss if we didn't give a very special thank you to Mayor Stromberg, who has diligently supported us every step of our journey. He has been a great champion for us and for civil/human rights in general.

We are forever grateful for everyone's support, from Ashland to Medford, including but not limited to the Ashland Chamber, the Ashland City Council, Southern Oregon University, retail shops, restaurants, wineries, local artists, devoted volunteers to name a few. We thank you one and all!

**Business Information:**

Southern OregonPride is a 501C3 non-profit organization, and we support other local non-profit organizations with particular focus on helping troubled teens. There is more information available on our website (see below).

**Southern OregonPride**

Gina DuQuenne, President/Founder

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