

NINA MOINI: Twin Cities Pride returns this weekend with its annual festival in Loring Park and parade in downtown Minneapolis on Sunday. Over the past 53 years, the festival has grown to attract thousands of people to come see performers, check out vendors, and celebrate with friends and family. This year's celebration comes during a challenging moment for many LGBTQ+ people, with ongoing political battles over transgender rights nationwide.

Andi Otto is the executive director of Twin Cities Pride. He's on the line to talk about this year's festivities and what holding a pride celebration means in 2026. Thanks for being with us, Andi.

ANDI OTTO: Oh, thanks for having me.

NINA MOINI: There's joy to hold and grief. I hate to start with what a difficult year it's been, but it has been. It's been a reality for many people, from the surge in ICE activity earlier this year to the continued targeting of LGBTQ+ rights. Can you share how those issues have shaped the planning for this year's celebration?

ANDI OTTO: Yeah, I think it comes in two different ways. It comes where you have to be cautious, and you have to think about safety and what it really means to bring the community together when we've seen it be such a target.

But on the flip side, you have to plan in a way that brings joy and celebration to the community and reminds them that they belong here in Minnesota and that they are a valued part of the community and what makes Minnesota, Minnesota. So for us, we look at all different things, like, how do we bring joy and safety and security and resources, and on the flip side, make sure that we do have things in place to make sure that everyone is safe and has a great time out here at the festival?

NINA MOINI: Tell me a little bit about the performers, the vendors people can expect to find. Or I know it's going to be a ton, a ton to choose from, but what are a few highlights for maybe a first-timer?

ANDI OTTO: Yeah, you know what I really love about our festival and about the performers, is the majority of them-- and I'll say 90% of the performers here at the festival-- are all Minnesota artists.

NINA MOINI: Nice.

ANDI OTTO: So they are folks that you can see around. And I think it's really cool that we're able to give that a showcase here in front of hundreds of thousands of people. And so that's super fun. So you have everything from a drag stage over at Stonewall to our Power to the People stage, which is celebrating 25 years this year, to our Rainbow Stage, which is really focused on our youth.

And so those are always super fun, always a great time. You'll find lots of folks sitting in front of those, enjoying some good food and some great entertainment. And then we have over 650 booths, and that ranges anything from finding that little trinket that you absolutely just have to have from our artists to resources to live your most authentic life all year long. And so you can find lots of things.

But there is one thing that's going to make a huge impression this year, and that is Mama Duck. Mama Duck is making her appearance here in the park to bring that joy. And what says joy more than a 61-foot-tall rubber duck right in the middle of Loring Park? So she will make her debut and be all visible on Saturday morning. They're loading her in on Friday night. And Saturday morning, she will make her very large visual appearance in the park.

NINA MOINI: And I know you mentioned the Power to the People stage. And I know that you're also going to be recognizing Nick Metcalf for his leadership in creating the stage. Tell me a little bit about Nick, if you would, and why it was important to have this honor this year.

ANDI OTTO: Yeah, I think, 25 years ago, when Nick really took charge and said, hey, wait a second, we need to have a stage that represents this portion of the community, and really pointed out the biggest thing in our community, and that's intersectionality between lots of different communities within the LGBTQ community.

And so he really, in a time that kept getting told no to making of this stage that is equal in size, if not the biggest stage at this point, here in the park, and really just kind of kept that foot forward and said, this is important, and continued to show us the way and has continued to be a leader in the community when it comes to Native and just BIPOC culture and history within the LGBTQ community. So we're really excited to be able to honor him.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, and you also mentioned the stage more focused on youth voices and young people. What do you tell young people in this day and age of social media and just such an influx of information and sometimes really hateful rhetoric? What are you hoping young people take away from this?

ANDI OTTO: Yeah, I think one of the biggest things that I always say, and as a trans man myself-- look, I get it, right-- is that you're never alone. You're never alone in this battle. There are hundreds of us out there using our voices and our platforms to try to make that difference. And so please don't forget that you are perfect just the way you are, and that there are so many of us fighting the battle to keep them safe and to celebrate them for who they are. And when you come into Loring Park this weekend, that yourself, bring your true authentic self because you're perfect just the way you are.

NINA MOINI: And Twin Cities Pride attracts people really from all over the state, sometimes neighboring states. Do you feel like more people from other states or other places might be attending this year, just considering how much Minneapolis and the Twin Cities were in the news?

ANDI OTTO: Yeah, I think there's a couple different reasons. We've really seen the influx since the trans refuge bill was passed because I think that that tells folks that they're safe here in Minnesota.

NINA MOINI: In 2023.

ANDI OTTO: Yeah, and that you're celebrated, right? And then now, I think this year, just with us being in the news about how we handled the metro surge and that we are truly about community, I think people are looking for that. They're wanting to find that and wanting to be part of something that only Minnesota-- and I might be a little biased, but only Minnesota can show. And that is community. And when community pulls together, we are bigger, we are stronger, and we do not back down.

NINA MOINI: And Andi, I want to end sort of on a logistical note. [LAUGHS] Goody. But I do think sometimes people can be overwhelmed by crowds or parking or accessibility, or they want to go for the first time. What tips do you have, recommendations for just planning out their weekend? A lot is going to be going on. Special Olympics are going on. A lot's going on.

ANDI OTTO: There is a lot going on, and I love that you asked this question because, yeah, it can be really overwhelming. I always say, check out our website, pcpride.org. Stay up to date on our social media. We post a lot of great information, everything from accessibility map, which what services we have here in the park, anything from family services to an escape space, which is a sensory-friendly space. So lots of opportunities. We even have wheelchairs for rental free of charge for a first come, first serve. So there's lots of different things.

And when it comes to travel, don't be afraid to use Metro Transit, offers free rides here. It's a great way to do that Park and Ride aspect so that you don't have to navigate parking around the park. And the other one, too, is if you are in the outer lining areas, Southwest Transit is bringing folks in from the Eden Prairie location. So that's another great resource to do. And get yourself in, just like you do at the State Fair, but lots of opportunities. Don't hesitate to ask questions. And just plan your ride here. But when things get overwhelming, you can spend anything from an entire day to just a couple hours, whatever fits you best.

NINA MOINI: All right, Andi, thanks so much. Have a great time.

ANDI OTTO: Thank you. Have a great day, and Happy Pride.

NINA MOINI: Andi Otto is the executive director of Twin Cities Pride.