



Rockford's first-ever Pride fest aims to unify, educate and build a better future

By Ron Matthew Inawat

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ROCKFORD, IL -- Residents and visitors to Rockford, Illinois will be celebrating the city's inaugural Pride Fest on Saturday, June 9th, 2012. Organizers expect 2,000 to 5,000 attendees to the festival which will include civil union ceremonies throughout the day, live entertainment, vendors and guest speakers.

The festival will take place from 11am-11pm in Davis Park (320 S. Wyman Street, Rockford, IL 61101), located in downtown Rockford.

Ron Almanza, creator of Rockford Pride Fest, told ChicagoPride.com that the inspiration for starting the Pride Festival came after a struggle with his employer to change their benefit policies regarding same-sex couples.

"We were empowered to want to do more for the rest of Rockford," Almanza commented. "From there stemmed the drive to take on other struggles facing the LGBT community here in Rockford. Illinois is a great platform for change here in the Midwest and the ability to become a role model State for the surrounding states with a little push, education and visibility."

The [Rockford Pride Fest website](#) accentuates the mission of the festival which is to provide an atmosphere "where no prejudice or rejection of any human-being will take place."

Almanza expressed that the goal of the festival is "to unify to the Rockford LGBT community and educate the straight community, to promote our allies, and to build a better tomorrow for our younger generation."

"We believe that once the people of Rockford, both allies and LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender], see the need for change they will rise up and unify to promote awareness and equality and fight for the rights that are currently being denied."

Support for the festival, from both the LGBT and ally community, has been growing rapidly. The festival's [facebook page](#) has received over 3,500 likes in just under a year.

Board members of Rockford Pride Fest include B. Ashley Varboncoeur, Daniel Larson, Sabrina Stevens, Suzie Italiano, John Johansen, Keith La Croix and Jose Almanza.

Almanza is thankful for the businesses and business leaders who have supported the festival. Sponsors and supporters include Exelon Corp./Exelon Pride group, SkyWave President Daniel Larson, The Office Nightclub and Someplace Else II bar.

Rockford Pride Fest continues to look for volunteers, vendors and sponsors. More information can be found on the festival [website](#) [website](#). Couples interested in celebrating a civil union during the festival can find the information on the festival's [civil unions page](#).

"We would like to thank the people of Rockford for being so receptive to our growing need of diversity, equality and visibility in

the community here," Almanza added. "I know the road ahead is narrow, but one at a time we can all make it through to the other side where equality, unity, awareness and harmony thrive. I believe change in 2012 is a key part in realizing these feats, and look forward to many more accomplishments nationwide."