

How a pink Knysna festival was born



Richard Dawson (left) and his spousal partner Colin Lang formed part of initiating the Pink Loerie Festival 16 years ago. Photo: Vernondo Boshoff Photography

KNYSNA NEWS - Richard Dawson and his spousal partner Colin Lang spoke to the Knysna-Plett Herald about their involvement in the now 16-year-old Pink Loerie Mardi Gras & Arts Festival.

According to Dawson, soon after moving to Knysna in 1995, a small group held an informal meeting to discuss what Knysna's LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersex) community could do to "liven things up" during the very quiet months between Easter and the Oyster Festival.

"Both Colin and I, as well as owner of Candelight [a then Knysna coffee shop] Mike Vlok wanted to share the uniqueness and beautiful environment of this wonderful town," explained Dawson.

He added that during the 30 years prior to their retirement to Knysna they were steadily counted among those who had been pressing for the recognition of a Charter of General Human Rights and in particular, those of homosexual persons in the South African society.

He added that during the 30 years before retiring in Knysna they were steadily counted among those who had been pressing for the recognition of a Charter of General Human Rights and in particular, those of homosexual persons in the South African society.

"Our group of local gay friends and our considered project were encouraged by the liberty and freedom we felt after the New Constitution that was adopted in 1996," said Dawson . "We asked ourselves: 'why don't we consider holding aGay Festival in Knysna, a type of 'Mardi Gras' to make a statement of 'Gaylib'?"

"Our group of local gay friends and our considered project were encouraged by the liberty and freedom we felt after the new Constitution that was adopted in 1996," said Dawson. "We asked ourselves, 'Why don't we consider holding a gay festival in Knysna, a type of mardi gras to make a statement of 'gaylib'?"

This festival should attract many folk from outside Knysna to enjoy a programme of events and functions, with a final and most important event, a colourful gay street parade, with floats on the Saturday afternoon, with charitable appeals included along the route."

He added, "Because the Knysna Loerie bird is unique to the area and famous for the red flashes in its spread wings, it was agreed that the title of the festival would include this bird and naturally we included pink, as this referred to gay colours."

The group of like-minded friends received permission from the Knysna municipality to close off Main Street to traffic for the selected afternoon and so the highlight of the festival, the Pink Loerie Street Parade was born.

According to Dawson, numerous planning sessions were held before the first festival's events were finalised. "These included dancing at the local nightclub, Al's Tat was owned and run by the competent and friendly Alan Sass. At that stage Zanzibar Club (home to many modern-day festival events) was known as The Barnyard Theatre."

The first Pink Loerie Festival organising committee chairperson was the enterprising Juan Lerm, who was followed by Coenie Kukkuk and now John-Louis O'Neil.

"At one of the festivals we had Ms Cathay Specific perform. She sang inimitably with wit and humour, drawing a huge crowd that gathered under a marquee after the street parade," Dawson remembered. O'Neil lauded Dawson and Lang and said, "I believe the Pink Loerie Festival's growth can possibly be ascribed to the strong foundations laid by the founding committee. For this we thank and salute Richard and the committee for their dedication and support of all LGBTI rights."

Sadly Lang, now 88 years old, is extremely ill and will be unable to attend events during this year's festival. "I will however attend and partake in events whenever possible, unless I have to be with Colin, who has and is spending most of his time in bed because the doctor/specialist has informed him that sadly there is nothing more that medical treatment can do," said an emotional Dawson.