



**MR. GAY INTERNATIONAL?** - After winning the title of Mr. Gay Canada, North Vancouver's Darren Bruce heads to the Mr. Gay International competition in Whistler. *Daniel Pi photo*

# Meet Mr. Gay

**National contest winner advocates for gay rights and education while debunking tired stereotypes.**

There is no crown for the winner. Instead, there's a tailored vest.

It reads "Mr. Gay." And well, yeah, there's an emblazoned crown in the lettering.

If you see the photo of Darren Bruce, vest bared, collar popped, rugged cheek bones blazing, you might get the idea that this is a straight-up beauty pageant. It's not, although he is completely gorgeous.

The 25 year-old Argyle grad went to the Whistler competition in September as Mr. North Vancouver. He came home with the title of Mr. Gay Canada after completing a series of tasks and evaluations – there was a mini eco-challenge, a public speaking contest, plus the eight entrants were graded on leadership, teamwork, and communication skills. More than two-thirds of the criteria were based on personality and life skills.

But it also didn't hurt that Bruce won the swimsuit competition.

"It's not a beauty pageant," Bruce stresses in a visit to *The Outlook* shortly following his national title win. "We were on the spot the whole time. There were judges watching carefully." He uses the eco-challenge to describe the competition's leadership focus. "There were eight of us running through the forest, rappelling down a rock cliff wall. It was pouring rain out. We were in backpacks, raincoats. We felt pretty tough."

Sitting and chatting about the flurry of media interest that followed his Mr. Gay Canada win, Bruce modestly acknowledges his time as ex-alpine ski racer with the junior national crew, training on the local mountains.

He's also a recent graduate of UBC's Engineering Physics program, and he plans to launch a career in sustainable living and green technologies, hopefully owning his own business some day.

He conveys an articulate, thoughtful, soft-spoken perspective about what it means to be a queer spokesperson.

First he asks if I expected a glitter-painted guy in a speedo, dancing to techno music on a rainbow Pride float, tossing lollipops, maybe

wearing a boa. I laugh. To be honest, I almost did. I saw a press release about what I thought was a gay beauty pageant, and ultra-flamboyant came to mind – disco gay.

The whole point of the Mr. Gay pageant, though, is to promote a more nuanced gay identity – one that extends past the neon lights of gay town.

"Sexuality is a spectrum," Bruce explains.

"Queer and straight can blend in spaces that are positive but not designated ... Gay communities can't be measured in rainbow flags."

But still, he points out, the disco floats and neon lights have their time and their place.

Dean Nelson and Terry Costa, the co-owners of Mr. Gay Canada, say they created the pageant to identify young leaders who will work as positive role models "and who will work on humanizing being gay."

Mr. Gay Canada's role is to "take responsibility not only for his own community but also on a global stage speaking out for equal rights."

Bruce will appear in a number of televised spots and public service announcements produced by OUTtv, promoting safe sex. He plans to meet leaders around the country to discuss homophobia and education.

"I want to focus on education in Canada and abroad," he explains. "Canada is a very tolerant country but sometimes we forget the rest of the world isn't. There's still 70 countries around the world where it's illegal, seven where it's punishable by death."

He talks about two recent Pride parades in Budapest, where queer demonstrators were attacked with acid and fire bombs. He hopes to focus on "Pride in conflict areas. I think that would be really neat to go there and see first hand how much courage their lives would take to stand out there and march."

This February, think of Bruce as he heads back to the Mr. International Gay competition in Whistler. There he will compete against entrants from 20 other countries, spokesperson for the idea that gay isn't a stereotype, but a flexible, inclusive space for evolving identities. It's also a space for a swimsuit competition, in which, no doubt, Bruce has an excellent shot.

coffee  
with

Kelly  
McManus



[kmcmanus@northshoreoutlook.com](mailto:kmcmanus@northshoreoutlook.com)