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Party for Toronto Norwegians made sweeter by Eurovision win
Mary Gazze, cp24.com



A woman holds a flag at festivities for Toronto's celebration of Norway's Constitution Day in Dufferin Grove Park on May 17, 2009. (Mary Gazze/CP24)

Toronto's small but proud Norwegian community has two reasons to celebrate Sunday after a Norwegian musician won the Eurovision song contest the eve before the country's national holiday.

About 200 Norwegian-Canadians celebrated Constitution Day--- that country's equivalent to Canada Day-- with waffles, hot dogs, colourful costumes and songs at Dufferin Grove Park near Dufferin Street and Bloor Street W.

People in the crowd say they always have fun at the party, but what made it even sweeter was knowing that fiddle-wielding Norwegian singer Alexander Rybak's winning song "Fairytale" won with a perfect score.

"I knew the first time I heard the song we'd win," said Erik Welle-Strand, who came from Norway to visit his sister Kari Beese.

The contest may not seem like a big deal to North Americans, but over 100 million viewers in 42 European countries tune in every year in hopes their country will take home bragging rights and the trophy.

This is Norway's first win in 14 years. The country has come a long way since infamously scoring zero points back in 1978.

"We're the most patriotic country. We're extremely proud of winning the contest," says Beese, who waves Norway's red flag with a blue cross. Her costume, or Budnad, consists of a red plaid top over a white shirt, with a burgundy skirt, and yellow plaid shawl.

Each Budnad varies from region to region and her costume is from the Gudbrandsdalen valley. The closest city is Lillehammer, which hosted the 1994 winter Olympics.

The celebrations in Toronto and Oslo are usually geared towards kids, with games, and a royal parade, but the Eurovision win meant that people of all ages could celebrate.

"The [Toronto] parade is really an expression of jubilation," says Knut Larsen, President of the Norwegian Club of Toronto. The holiday commemorates the day when Norway got its own constitution and freedom from the Danish government in 1814.

"There's not a great Norwegian population in Toronto, so this is a way of staying connected with my home country," says Anina Friis, who has lived in Toronto for 20 years.

With Toronto's huge multicultural fabric being dominated by other ethnicities, you rarely hear about the goings on of the small Norwegian-Canadian population here.

Census data from 2006 shows there are about 14,000 people who identify themselves as Norwegian in the GTA. Compare that to some of the city's large communities like the 530,000 Chinese or 460,000 Italians.

Alexander Bjørnvidar admits people in Toronto don't know much about his homeland, and some don't even think it's a country at all.

"They think Norway is the capital of Sweden," he says. "[The Eurovision] win will help people know more about Norway."

People in the crowd were eager to share their culture with those passing by.

Anina Friis was sporting a dark grey knit wool sweater. She pointed out that many others in the crowd were wearing a similar sweater which uses a traditional Norwegian pattern that is hundreds of years old.

Larsen says he thinks the current attention on Rybak's music will have only a small impact on modern Norwegian culture and the world's perception of his small homeland of only 4.8 million people.

"Some people find that [contest] silly or not worthwhile," he says. "If it leads to an interest in Norwegian culture, I think it's great."

But he is glad that some of Norway's traditional fiddle music made it through to Rybak's finished product for the entire world to see.

"Its great publicity for godsakes!" he says.