

Photography: www.mrgayuk.co.uk

Pride and prejudice?

West Yorkshire police officer Mark Carter recently won the title of Mr Gay UK. He talks to *Police* magazine about his experiences of being an openly gay officer in the service.

As captain of his local football team in a northern town, Mark Carter was embroiled in many a stereotypical lads' night out; nightclubs, drinking and chatting up girls. Little would he or his friends know that a few years down the line he would be awarded the title of Mr Gay UK.

It is only in the last couple of years that the beat officer from West Yorkshire Police has felt comfortable being open

about his sexuality. Part of the reason for that is, not only his desire to be honest about who he is, but also to encourage other police officers to be comfortable about being openly gay.

The 23-year-old constable, based in Huddersfield, has been given a great deal of support by his police colleagues and the force itself – 50 of them turned up en-masse wearing T-shirts emblazoned with PC Carter's image at the awards, held in Blackpool in September. The force also sent out a press release.

"I was just on a random night out at a club in Birmingham when the Mr Gay UK heats were being held, they were actively trying to get people to participate and after a few beers I got on stage and won the heat.

"The next day I woke up with a sore head and thought I may be bringing the force into disrepute or something."

But after speaking with his inspector and getting some support from the force, he was encouraged to continue

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with the competition. The local press picked up that a police officer from West Yorkshire was in the running for the title and was openly gay.

But he’s also no stranger to homophobia and it took him years before he could be honest about his sexuality with family and friends – let alone stand on a stage at a Blackpool nightclub in his swimming trunks.

“I had very straight mates and would go out with them and would be pulling girls in clubs but I would disappear at midnight to go to a gay club. No one knew and I felt I was leading a double life, I would cry at night and wish I could feel differently.

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PC Carter was voted Britain’s sexiest gay man at Blackpool’s Flamingo Club and he even appeared in a police-style outfit including a stab-proof vest during a ‘dress to impress’ section.

The officer, who joined West Yorkshire Police in December 2004, said it was not long before the public started to recognise him: “While I was out on the beat people would shake my hand and say it was brilliant; there are others who would shout abuse but I was determined to take the rough with the smooth.

“You get a lot of abuse as a police officer but I think we have some of the best training in the world and I can deal with a lot more than a few comments.”

Does he believe the police service is more open to being more representative of the gay community?

He replies: “My force has been very supportive and I have had people emailing me saying they are glad I am doing it, even from closeted colleagues. Taking part in Mr Gay UK has been really good for building bridges. People who are not out are able to see an officer who is open about it and has been supported.”

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A view from the Gay Police Association

Vic Codling, national co-ordinator of the Gay Police Association, said that the organisation was pleased that PC Carter received such positive support from West Yorkshire Police.

He added: “We pass on our congratulations to PC Mark Carter. You have to ask the question as to which other chief officer team would be as supportive as to allow an officer to be so open about winning such a competition.

“It is strong leadership that allows officers to be openly gay. Where there is strong leadership and conversation about gay issues we have found officers are more likely to be openly gay, where this is not the case, officers are much less likely to be open about it.”

The GPA estimate around 12 percent of the 140,000 officers in England and Wales are gay.

- The GPA run a 24-hour action line for gay officers who may want advice on: 07092 700 000.