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The bra-haha that went global

A mom nurses in public and discovers some folks don't think breast is always best

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SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2005
UPDATED AT 8:05 AM EST

When Erika Ross lifted her shirt and unsnapped her bra to nurse her newborn daughter last month in Dufferin Grove Park, she never expected that people across Canada, the United States and even Finland would end up weighing in on it.

But the innocent gesture unwittingly drew her and others in her community-minded Dufferin-and-Bloor neighbourhood into a passionate international debate on breastfeeding in public. During the past six weeks, moms and "lactivists" from around the world have weighed in, using e-mail and on-line message boards. There's also talk of activists across North America planning a rally in Toronto during World Breastfeeding Week this August, possibly at the park where the bra-haha began.

Dufferin Grove is normally the kind of park that urban activists dream about. In the summer, there's a giant sandbox, a farmers market, and dance and theatre festivals. In the winter, the ethnically and economically diverse residents mingle over organic meals at the park's rink house.

Recreation turned to recrimination on Jan. 7, when Ms. Ross and her husband brought their baby and toddler to the park's Friday Night Supper program. It was their first outing with their 12-day-old newborn and they enjoyed munching vegan food by a wood stove and catching up with friends.

Then Ms. Ross, 33, pulled up her shirt and opened one cup of her nursing bra to breastfeed -- inadvertently flashing the room (including a few men lacing up for shinny) for a moment when her baby didn't latch on to her nipple right away.

Park volunteer Jutta Mason rushed over and asked Ms. Ross to move to the washroom. "She was standing up and appeared to be taking her shirt off over one side of her head," Ms. Mason says. "She had most of her upper body exposed. The question was: Where was it going?"

The answer is probably not what 57-year-old Ms. Mason expected.

Ms. Ross was humiliated and angered by the interference. The next day, the grad student e-mailed a complaint to the Friends of Dufferin Grove Park website. She asked for an apology from Ms. Mason and wanted park staff and volunteers to be better educated about women's right to breastfeed.

What Ms. Ross didn't know is that Ms. Mason is the driving force behind Friends of Dufferin Grove and editor of the website. She posted Ms. Ross's note to the Friends message board -- along with comments in her defence. Vehement typing from all quarters ensued.

"The thing just exploded. This is a very leftist group, a very activist group, so people really ran with it," Ms. Ross says of the Friends.

Besides concerned onlookers in the park and neighbourhood residents, La Leche League, the Topfree Equal Rights Association, Moms for Milk and bra company Bravado Designs also had a say.

For those on Ms. Ross's side, Ms. Mason's meddling was not only a human-rights offence, it smacked of

moralistic prudery. "I don't think one lactating breast will cause the ultimate downfall of anyone's moral code," wrote one of Ms. Ross's supporters. "I'm in Georgia, good ole' U-S of A, where exposing your breasts for any reason is considered a mortal sin by half the residents, so I feel your pain!" e-mailed another.

Those in Ms. Mason's camp championed her desire for modesty in a community setting. One wrote that the situation reminded him of Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction," though this time he blamed the left for imposing their moral values on the community instead of the right. Many residents trumpeted Ms. Mason's 13 years as a park volunteer and history as a La Leche League leader herself.

As for the city, its policy is clear: Women have the right to breastfeed any time, anywhere, in accordance with Ontario's Human Rights Code. "Unfortunately, this isn't really debatable," says city councillor Adam Giambrone. So the parks department issued an apology to Ms. Ross.

Ms. Mason still refuses to do the same. In fact, she's now requesting the city launch an investigation into the incident. Following rumours of activists planning to stage a "nurse-in" at a Friday Night Supper, she has also cancelled the program until spring. Getting what she calls "hate mail" has taken its toll on her personally as well, she says.

And the mom whose nipple started it all? "Having my breasts discussed worldwide at length is pretty disconcerting," Ms. Ross says. Yet she stands by her rights. "I'm disappointed in a handful of people who have tried to reduce the incident to a simple case of hurt feelings. Yes, my feelings were hurt. Rosa Parks probably had some hurt feelings too when she refused to sit in the back of the bus."

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