



Richmonder goes viral at 'Heated Rivalry' lookalike contest, uses platform to build queer community

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RICHMOND, Va. (WRIC) — Richmond startup founder Felix Eller is no stranger to unusual requests: participate in lookalike contests, try a Russian accent on TikTok or marry someone he met less than a month ago.

The third request — usually coming from internet fans — arrived after Eller and his counterpart won a Washington, D.C., lookalike contest inspired by [“Heated Rivalry,”](#) a Canadian romance TV series about two gay hockey players who navigate their on-ice rivalry alongside a casual off-ice



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Pop culture lookalike contests have grown in popularity across the U.S. in recent years. The competition held on Saturday, April 4, at the capital's beer garden Wunder Garten was no exception, drawing dozens of celebrity doppelgangers. Among them were Eller and Aram Matagi, who competed as the show's leads: Ilya Rozanov (played by Connor Storrie) and Shane Hollander (played by Hudson Williams), respectively.

Eller's [TikTok video](#) capturing a steamy kiss shared with Matagi during the final tiebreaker round quickly went viral, with outlets like [CNN](#) reposting the passionate moment. Fans flooded the comments, praising the pair's chemistry and touting it as a real-life "Heated Rivalry" moment.

"If someone had told me prior that this contest is going to end with a kiss, I'd be like 'OK, sure,'" Eller recalled. "When it was happening and the way it unfolded was a bit of a surprise in the best way."

[@felix.eller](#) Won more than the competition 🥰🥰🥰 [#heatedrivalry](#) [#mlm](#)
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The pair continued to take the internet by storm after sharing details of their date the next day. The eight-hour rendezvous began at a breakfast taco place in the District with Matagi's friends, then the two moved to a cafe and finally wrapped up at Matagi's place with music and several rounds of cards, Eller recalled.

"It was very wholesome," the Richmonder said.

Eller and Matagi have since gone on multiple dates, including a sponsored trip to a Professional Women's Hockey League [game](#) between the Boston Fleet and the Montreal Victoire. Actress Ksenia Daniela Kharlamova, who played Svetlana in "Heated Rivalry," was also [in attendance](#).

The two shared yet another kiss on camera at the game on Saturday, April 11 — this time on a jumbotron, in front of nearly 18,000 hockey fans.



Aram Matagi (left) and Felix Eller (right) at the P.W.H.L. game on April 11 in Boston. (Photo: Felix Eller)

To Eller who experienced intense homophobia growing up, the widely broadcast kiss — shown on the big screen at a [sold-out stadium](#) and met with celebration — “healed” something in him.

In [a written piece](#) for the Gen Z media platform [Impact](#), Eller shared that he was called a homophobic slur in one instance and received a death threat in another while in school. The

Richmond resident said he has since been intentional about avoiding humor that could come across as mean, given his childhood trauma and stereotypes about gay men being petty or catty.

The jumbotron kiss, to Eller, felt “unreal.”

“I’m pretty confident about being able to walk down the street holding someone’s hand. [Richmond and Washington, D.C.,] are safe places, but athletic spaces and sports in general can be homophobic or can at least feel not extremely welcoming,” he said. “The fact that it was being celebrated the way it was... I don’t know if I ever thought that would be possible.”

Eller said neither he nor Matagi plans to become a full-time influencer, but he’s grateful for the newfound attention. The former human rights major at Davidson College in North Carolina said he’s navigating the unexpected spotlight in a way that supports his ongoing pursuits, including projects that uplift queer people and queer art.

Translating his experience into creating safe spaces for Richmonders through his startup, Eller now dedicates much of his time to developing “[Hit the Town](#),” an app that allows users to support local businesses and filter by ownership identity, such as queer-owned, Black-owned or women-owned. The goal is to shop local and reward good consumer behavior, Eller said.

“It’s important because finding safe space, financially supporting your community, economically empowering any oppressed or minority group can lead to political power,” he said. “Richmond is a great city for it because it’s very diverse here... we really believe in our own.”

An advocate for inclusivity, the entrepreneur also founded the [Rainbow Miles run club](#) when he moved back to the city after college. The club, which meets twice a week on Wednesdays at Gold

Lion Community Cafe and on Thursdays at the LGBTQ bar Babe's of Carytown, creates an active and sober queer space and fosters community.

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The Rainbow Miles run club saw 40 runners at its record-breaking gathering on Thursday, April 23.

Richmond's longest-standing run specialty store, [Lucky Road Run Shop](#), is a supporting partner of Rainbow Miles. The local staple, with over 30 years in business, often works behind the scenes, helping promote the club's initiatives and organizing vendor demos, said owner Jeff Van Horn.

The partnership, set against the backdrop of a booming running community, helps advance Eller's shop-local mission, while keeping Richmonders' dollars in the local economy. Van Horn said helping customers is his "life's purpose" as it gives him a sense of fulfillment and sets the locally owned business — now with four stores in Richmond and one in Fredericksburg — apart from larger retailers.

"This is my passion," he said.

Rainbow Miles' most recent event was record-breaking, with about 40 runners hitting the pavement on Thursday, April 23. The tight-knit club also hosts monthly queer picnics — its latest gathering was the largest yet, drawing 50 attendees.



As for his relationship with Matagi, the Richmonder emphasized that while the pair go on dates, they are not necessarily dating. Eller said that some netizens have prodded them to "get married," while others have cautioned against rushing into commitments. Though he welcomes the unsolicited advice — most of it well-intentioned, he noted — Eller tries not to let pressure from the internet dictate the trajectory of his connection with Matagi.

"We've known each other for 24 days now — it'd be crazy to be in a relationship that fast," Eller said Wednesday. Though he enjoys traveling back and forth between Washington, D.C., and Richmond, he added that the distance is another factor for them to consider over time.

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