This page was exported from - The Auroran
Export date: Thu Mar 28 10:19:06 2024 / +0000 GMT

Students, Council raise Pride flags as York Region gears up for weekend festival



By Brock Weir

Aurora students came together with a united voice on Thursday morning calling for continued efforts towards equity.

Donning rainbow-coloured flower wreaths in their hair and waving equally colourful flags, they gathered at the York Region District School Board's Wellington Street West office to help the Board raise the flag to celebrate Pride Month.

Thursday morning's ceremony was but a warmup to this weekend's big York Pride bash in Newmarket and these students helped set the tone for the commemorations ahead ? a tone of inclusion and making sure the strides that have been taken towards equality so far are not taken for granted.

?Today, as a student entering high school, it is easy to feel alone or out of place,? said Olive Heisler, a Grade 10 student at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School. ?It is easy to believe the horror stories of discrimination and bullying, and youth and violence, but that didn't happen at my school when I joined, largely because of my friendly GSA.

?Years ago, the Gay Straight Alliance had to be renamed the Equity Council because joining meant you were automatically labelled as an LGBT member, but now the queer population at our school is only getting larger. Through strong support systems like our council, school-wide events and friendships, I have witnessed so many brave people come out and wear their identity proudly. I would like to think our GSA has helped with that.

?I believe in the ability to make all members of school feel safe and part of that larger community, and I think that our GSA is helping to play a role in that. I would like to thank all of the GSAs for the roles they play in supporting our growing community and for doing this to show how proud we are today.?

These sentiments were shared by Michelle Cai, who is also a Grade 10 student at Williams.

As co-president of Williams' Equity and GSA Council, Michelle said Pride is something that should be ?important to all of us because it gives us a sense of unity and inclusion.?

?GSA drives the courage to show our identities properly because the sense of community GSA brings shows that we are not alone,? she said. ?I met one of my best friends through GSA and I have been with her through her journey and watched the bravery to come out as bisexual and grow into the amazing girl that she is today. I think that I have all the support from GSA to thank for all of this. I am proud to be part of this year's Pride flag raising and show my support for such an amazing community.?

During the ceremonies, Louise Sirisko, Director of Education for the York Region District School Board, echoed the sentiments of the students, reiterating the Board's commitment to fostering safe spaces in each of the Board's schools. The Pride flag might be a symbol, she said, but it is flown as a message ?for the entire world to see.?

?It is a public declaration,? said Ms. Sirisko. ?The symbol of the rainbow is to symbolize individuals who are 2SLGBTQ who love a person of the same sex, who are questioning their sexual orientation, who are transgender. Who you are and who you love is part of who you are and us raising the flag says to our community and to the world that that is celebrated, and that is protected. We are so very fortunate to have a country like Canada, to have a place like Ontario, and we proudly in York Region declare that every single one of our classrooms, our schools, is a place of safety, acceptance, of love, and celebration. Every child for who they are is to be celebrated. We denounce any form of hatred, any form of discrimination. We want our students to rise. For students who are in our audience today, who self-identify as 2SLGBTQ, we want you to know that our schools are so very proud of who you are. We want you to know you can reach out to other members ? your friends, your family ? to say our schools, our curriculum, celebrates you.

?The more students who feel that courage to have that acceptance, the more our environment is going to be one that we're not even having to have a conversation about discrimination. That is our job: our job is to be protecting and enabling our students to know that every place is safe.?

FESTIVITIES THIS WEEKEND

The York Pride Parade will take place on Main Street Newmarket this Saturday, June 15, at 3 p.m. This year's theme is ?Hand in Hand.? The parade will feature community organizations, music, drag queens, vintage cars, community heroes and more, with family-friendly activities pre-and-post-parade at the nearby Riverwalk Commons.

Pride on Riverwalk runs from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. and is billed as ?the ultimate day of enjoyment featuring a dazzling array of local and international entertainment? with beer gardens, food vendors, arts and crafts, face painting, reptile shows and more.

For more information, visit yorkpridefest.com.