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Sexual health and harm reduction in focus for Pride Month

Many things have been paused or stopped all together as a result of COVID-19, but sex isn't one of them, according to CAYR Community Connections, formerly the AIDS Committee of York Region.

And this is an issue that will be tackled head-on by CAYR and the Aurora Public Library next week to mark Pride Month.

On Friday, June 19, the CAYR and the APL will host Q&Gay: A Pride-inspired sexual health event on safe sex and harm reduction as it relates to communities in York Region.

Two sessions, one for youth between the ages of 12 and 16, and one for those 17 years-of-age or older, will offer each demographic the chance to ask questions in a safe virtual space moderated by CAYR.

?This is a safe space where folks will be able to celebrate who they are, ask questions about queer life, about sexual health, their physical health, and it will be an outlet to allow the community to come together again,? says CAYR's Lorcan O'Donnell, who says it has been a challenge to find spaces online and otherwise that are affirming to York Region's 2SLGBTQ community. ?Pride is one of those one weeks of the year where folks get to really be themselves, be celebrated and recognized as the vibrant and beautiful community we are. We want to make sure there was still a space to celebrate that this year, even though it would not be happening in the traditional sense.?

The APL has long been such an affirming space, with events and initiatives for the 2SLGBTQ+ community a regular feature of Pride month and all year round. Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the APL was set to host a record number of events, but the ongoing health emergency forced a significant re-think.

?We had to think about how we could pivot some of our programs for an online experience where everybody could both celebrate, learn and remember,? says Reccia Mandelcorn, Manager of Community Collaboration for the APL. ?Conversations went back and forth and, thanks to our partners who have the knowledge, they came up with this idea.

?We totally ran with it because we especially love that in involves two demographics because we know there are different questions they will have, different conversations. We did our part with posters and marketing, we talked about content, but we're giving it over to the experts and we're so delighted to be allowed to be part of this celebration with our partners.?

Promoting sexual health and harm reduction has been a key mandate of CAYR Community Connections since its inception for both men and women. It is a matter of education, says Mr. O'Donnell, and addresses gaps in

education that can be found elsewhere.

?When Queer folks in particular are growing up, they don't get the same type of?safe sex education like a lot of the general population,? he says. ?A lot of it is focused on men and women having sex and procreating to have a baby when there isn't a lot of time given over to the intricacies of Queer sex and how Queer people are disproportionately represented in terms of HIV rates and substance abuse. We're trying to bridge the gap so they are informed about their sex life and able to make empowered decisions about the sex that they want.?

Since the June 19 event was announced last week, question from both age groups have been rolling in.

Safety is a key aspect, say organizers, as are questions about relationships and intimacy.

?Day in and day out, young people in particular are asking about consent, which is a big issue,? says Mr. O'Donnell. ?People are asking about navigating online spaces and navigating hookup apps, navigating social media and just general safe sex questions about accessing things like PrEP for folks that are trying to avoid contracting HIV.?

Harm reduction is also a particular focus. Given the geographic and demographic diversity of York Region, reaching out to the community as a whole in this regard hasn't always been easy. Before the pandemic, people would come to the CAYR office for harm reduction supplies like condoms, needles and meth smoking kits. While these items, of course, can't be handed out in a virtual setting, the new format allows CAYR to reach wide groups and, given the fact one can turn off their camera before coming into the virtual session, create a safe and, if needed, anonymous space.

?After finishing these talks, there is a huge sense that the work we are doing is really important and the work that we're doing isn't being done by other organizations and we're really filling a space here where young folks in particular are in need of non-judgemental spaces, non-judgemental and open conversations where they feel comfortable enough to maybe ask questions they haven't been able to ask before. When you provide a space where people are feeling comfortable, you really do come away with a sense that the work is really worth doing.?

This is a sentiment to which Ms. Mandelcorn agrees.

?We went online because we didn't have a choice because of the current pandemic, but I think for some people this will actually be a good thing because you can be seen or not seen, you don't have to come out, and you can ask in a non-judgemental space and get important answers,? she says. ?In some ways, I would like to see even when we're back in ?real people time' I would love to see some of these things continue online because I think there are people who need this online in the safety of their own homes as well.?

Q&Gay: A Pride-Inspired Sexual Health Event will take place Friday, June 19. Session 1 for individuals 17-years-of-age or older, will take place from 12 noon to 1.30 p.m. Register at bit.ly/2XnuqkG. Session 2, for individuals between the ages of 12 and 16, will take place from 4 ? 5.30 p.m. Register at bit.ly/2BUKD4. Questions can also be submitted anonymously at bit.ly/2XntKf8.

By Brock Weir