

Pride Festival shows the power of ? and need for ? safe spaces



By Brock Weir

Just 12 months ago, when the crowds cleared after the 2017 Pride Festival, revellers were left with little options, most returning to their York Region homes or, in some cases, continuing the Pride spirit a bit further away from home in Downtown Toronto.

This year, however, was a very different story.

Once the York Pride Parade and Festival had called it a night, participants knew exactly where they were going ? and that was Stage 185.

Located just off Newmarket's Riverwalk Commons, a stone's throw from the Main Street Newmarket parade route, Stage 185 is Newmarket's latest lounge ? but it is not your every day lounge, it is the first York Region lounge space dedicated to the LGBTQ community.

For its founders though, it is much more: it is a safe space where the LGBTQ community can come and be themselves, a space they themselves did not have when they were growing up in York Region.

It was a struggle to get where they are today, shares Diana (Patrice) Morrison, who co-founded Stage 185 with her partner, with some in the wider community questioning whether Newmarket was ?ready for this establishment.?

?We had to prove we were more than just a restaurant or a lounge, but we are a foundation and a safe space for all,? she says. ?We were [dismissed as], ?just another club for gay men, sex and drugs' ? but you put a name and brand on us before we even open those doors, we had to go above and beyond to prove who we were.?

Stage 185 is a restaurant-lounge with a unique spin beyond it catering to the LGBTQ community; it offers a vegan menu that is inspired by the flavours of the Caribbean and the American south, reflective of the foods served by the co-founders' families while they were growing up.

While it typically will be programmed as a place for the 19+ crowd, there will be times set aside for activities and entertainment for people of all ages, including places for teens and young adults to flex their creative muscles with youth drag.

?We all went downtown and downtown is where we are accepted,? says Ms. Morrison. ?This is the closest thing we [have to that] up here. One statement I got is, ?Thank God for you guys providing some place where we don't have to travel all the way downtown.'

The LGBTQ community who moved from York Region to Toronto just to be themselves is high. I went downtown and I did the research. It is good now to hear they are moving back to [the area] because there is somewhere for them. We can keep ourselves here, keep our economy here, and have something for ourselves. It is very much needed.?

This is a sentiment very much shared by York Pride's Jacob Gal.

Mr. Gal says the mandate of their organization is building space for everyone.

From its humble beginnings, Mr. Gal says they have built a solid foundation for LGBTQ people of all ages, but have been particularly proud of creating safe spaces for LGBTQ youth.

?[It is important to have] one spot that is consistent and reliable, where you can actually program youth stuff,? he says. ?Social opportunities for youth is a key part of learning about your identity and sexual orientation, and it is a key part of your growing up

experience, [being] able to experience a culture that is part of your community at your own age.

?So many people get fake IDs and go downtown to experience the culture down there and they rarely ever program an all-ages event because they don't make money. If you're able to dedicate a space for that, that is a big step forward.?

There are a number of barriers that need to be broken down, he adds, and focusing on harm reduction and breaking down the stigma that lounges like Stage 185 is not a place for sex, rather a place to socialize, is key.

?So many people see or hear about something that has happened in Toronto in the past or present and they automatically assume that is what York Region is going to be and that is not true,? he says. ?You have to understand queer culture and go back 60 years to understand why the fight for sexual liberation was so huge in major cities across North America ? and that comes down to when you are oppressed for so long and looked down upon as 'disgusting,' you're going to do anything in your state of mind to prove everything is okay and you're not disgusting. We have it a little bit easier in York Region where we can recreate the wheel and start where we think is appropriate and that is a very important part of all of our growth here: showcasing that we can have a space but it is the people that make the space.?

Adds Diana: ?There is still a fight to bring safe space here and we have to step up more to come together more to do that. Yes, people love it and are for it, but some aren't and you are fighting that indirectly. There are people fighting for safe spaces and we have to fight it quietly.?