

Somewhere "Under the Rainbow" is right here, right now



By Brock Weir

Despite being out for many, many years there was a time when Nyk Morrigan had doubts.

They doubted themselves, they doubted who they were, and life was difficult.

Identifying as gender fluid, a person who does not define themselves by any one particular gender, Morrigan was at a loss and attempted to end their life, but after a long road of healing and seeking wellness, they are working hard to make sure local LGBTQ+ youth have the resources they need to keep well and pursue the paths that make them happy.

Morrigan sought help with the Aurora-based Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) and, once a client, now helps lead their Under the Rainbow program, which provides a safe, welcoming space run by peers where sexual and gender diversity is celebrated. Under the Rainbow brought together scores of LGBTQ+ people of all ages, as well as allies, to the Aurora Cultural Centre on Saturday for the Queer Wellness Festival. A collaboration between Under the Rainbow, the AIDS Committee of York Region, York Pride Fest, and the York Region Gay Straight Alliance, the Queer Wellness Festival was an opportunity to learn more about wellness from a holistic perspective and the resources available in our community to help achieve those end goals.

Opened with a smudging ceremony, attended by the CMHA's MOBYSS bus, and featuring entertainment from singer Kate Reid and comedian Chantel Marostica, Morrigan said it was an honour to be part of a team making such an event possible.

"I know there are a lot of challenges, high rates of suicide, high rates of depression and anxiety here in the community and, to me, having the honour and privilege of working with such an incredible team to make change for this community and my community is so important to me," says Morrigan.

"Under the Rainbow is a support and social group for members of the queer community and we do social events where it is just a place to enjoy each other's company and have fun and be silly and laugh, but it is also a place to have conversation and open up dialogue on what is really happening with individuals, and how we can make change."

It is also an honour to be working in close partnership with organizations such as the AIDS Committee, and York Pride Fest, they said, noting York Pride Fest has invited the CMHA to lead this Saturday's York Region Pride Parade on Main Street Newmarket. Judy Garland may have sung about that special somewhere "Over the Rainbow" but here in York Region, that rainbow is turned upside down to provide an all-encompassing umbrella for everyone who can fit under it. Since its inception three years ago, Under the Rainbow has grown but, according to Morrigan, there is still work to be done.

"I think there needs to be a little bit more outreach with respect to finding more individuals to come, but I think that has a lot to do with the fact York Region is huge and there are a lot of different services that are available for people to get support," they said.

"But, because York Region is so huge I don't know that the visibility is quite there yet. We're just working on trying to create more visibility and to show there are services that are accepting and open to supporting individuals."

Almost as soon as they became involved in Under the Rainbow, Morrigan said they quickly came to see that the "simplest thing can have the biggest impact."

"The fact it exists is the impact I am really proud of," they said. "I am also really proud of this agency and seeing how it has been open to supporting individuals like myself who have not only grown through the agency as a client but also as a staff member who

has a valuable contribution and is open to hearing how we can think outside of the box to support individuals like myself who identify as gender fluid. I just feel really proud to be part of an agency that supports that and wants to collaborate ? not work individually but collaborate with other agencies to promote queer wellness in whatever way we can do that.?

For the individuals gathered at the Aurora Cultural Centre on Saturday, that message was clear.

Looking over the roster of seminars and workshops set to take place throughout the evening ? and even ahead for the balance of Pride Month ? Morrigan said they hoped visitors would leave knowing that options and, perhaps most importantly, hope were out there and attainable.

?I think the most important thing is queerness exists in all ages and all socio-economic backgrounds,? they said. ?Queerness is not something that is static, it is very fluid ? it moves ? and I want to promote not only cohesiveness but also acceptance of such a diverse community. This community is so big and huge and the experience of an 80 year old person who might be queer is going to be very different than that of a 20 year old person who identifies.

?I use the word queer because I personally feel it is a larger umbrella term that really does incorporate a lot of different identities, but I understand that I have to be very clear that gender identity and sexual identity are two separate things and they are mutually exclusive. The two act as supporting walls for each other to say you have a community and you are accepted.?

For more on the programs offered by the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region, including Under the Rainbow, visit cmha-yr.on.ca. For a full list of this weekend's Pride activities in York Region, including the Fifth Annual York Region Pride Parade, set for a 10.30 a.m. start this Saturday, June 17, on Main Street Newmarket, visit yorkpridefest.com.