

## APL's Drag Queen Story Hour attracts more than 80 participants



Pride Month in Aurora kicked off Saturday morning with the annual Drag Queen Story Hour hosted by the Aurora Public Library and featuring the talents of Athena Vegas.

Held at the Library (APL) in association with Pflag York Region, more than 80 kids, parents, caregivers, and dignitaries such as Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner, and members of the Aurora Public Library Board filled APL's Magna Room for the occasion where Vegas read several interactive stories to children, each with a theme chosen to encourage kids to be themselves, led the families in song and dance, and simply offered a chance to have fun.

Two lone protestors, both carrying disparaging placards and covering their faces with balaclavas, demonstrated outside the APL on the opposite side of Yonge Street. Although peaceful, given the heated rhetoric that has surrounded Drag Queen Story Hours in both Canada and the United States over the last year, Pflag was prepared for any eventuality.

In the event of loud protestors, Pflag members and families gathered outside APL ahead of the event for the debut of Pflag York Region's Choir of Love, which sang songs ranging from Journey's Don't Stop Believing to Cyndi Lauper's Girls Just Want to Have Fun.

"We have a lot of amazing parents who are part of this group," Damian Mellin, Vice President of Pflag York Region, told The Auroran as the group sang and grew in numbers while Story Hour participants arrived. They just have this amazing energy about protecting their kids. What also comes into play is that sometimes it is important to have one vocalization, one group of people saying one thing. Part of the fun is having a message of love, caring, and a lot of music in my mind represents that. We went through and found 12 very popular songs that I even had to use ChatGPT to research songs that most people can sing without having any talent! We were able to find twelve songs that are kind of a range of everything from Lady Gaga to 80s and 70s rock. It's very fun and kind of a bit cheeky to have a fun event.

"Part of it too is we're unsure of how many people may show up and part of it is to have something loud enough if necessary to kind of drown out the other voices. Oftentimes, this community is very connected and engaged with the same message: care for children, make sure children are being cared for and love all. The other crowd, I think, are a bit disconnected. A bunch of them just don't want to learn information enough to be engaged with the topic to care about it, and some people are just out here because they are bigoted.

?Considering Pflag York Region has been in the news all this week with what has been happening with the York Catholic District School Board [and its decision not to fly the Progress Pride flag] we thought we would at least have something set up. Part of it is we're unsure how many people are actually going to show up but we want to ensure the entrance is a safe space for people to walk into. Because it is a library, anybody who is yelling at a library has a lot of other issues going on.?

But outside of the duo on the west side of Yonge Street, it was smooth sailing and joy inside.

?My granddaughter is just turning four, but I think it's important that she knows about diversity, that she respects all people, and enjoys everything,? said Councillor Gaertner who attended with granddaughter Hazel and Hazel's mother, Kate. ?Her mum's a teacher, so she already has quite a background but it's a wonderful way to introduce kids to other worlds. It's very important that we respect those other worlds.?

This was a view shared by Athena Vegas. The Aurora resident, who is known as Adam Barry when he's not in drag as Athena, has been a long-time APL patron, often studying for exams in its quiet environment. For Barry, it was something of a homecoming.

?It means a lot for the simple fact you don't see yourself in every single space of your hometown. In this space, I was just very excited to be given the opportunity to work this close with kids, make a positive impact, and [foster] a little bit more self-expression in themselves when they leave.?

Vegas, who has been doing story hours for the last couple of years, says he's been encouraged by seeing the events grow bigger and bigger with each passing year and, in turn, ?getting better and better.?

?I have seen good triumph over evil every single time I step into one of these spaces and the organization of this program, as well as many of the others I have done, is just perfect for kids. It's just watching them light up like this, which is proving the safe space we're all trying to create for each other. Sometimes when you're exposed to this positive kind of art in a safe manner, it allows you to kind of daydream a little bit? and I think [the kids] definitely saw all the glamour they needed for today!?

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