

Being yourself will be key message of inaugural Drag Queen Storytime



By Brock Weir

Whether or you want to dye your hair a different colour, wear funky shoes, or just stand out a little bit from the crowd, sometimes you hesitate being who you truly feel you are.

This Saturday, young patrons of the Aurora Public Library will learn just how fun it can be to be yourself, at their first ever Drag Queen Storytime.

Drag Queen Storytime, which will take place in the Magna Room June 2 from 10.30 - 11.30 a.m., is billed as a "magical storytime experience" hosted by Eva Lasting.

Kids will be invited to get involved in stories they love, and stories that will help kids "learn that it is great to be who you are." Kids will be able to become part of the story, wear some silly costumes, and much more.

The idea for the Aurora Public Library (APL) to host Drag Queen Storytime was a suggestion received during an "In Conversation" event with the community last year focused on issues facing the LGBTQ2+ community in Aurora and, more broadly, York Region. "I felt there was more need for events like this in York Region," says Allison Beattie, a teacher with the York Region District School Board, who made the initial suggestion after attending a similar event in Toronto. "I was representing Rainbow Umbrella, a peer organization support group for LGBTQ youth in York Region, and I voiced my idea - and Eva was so kind as to agree to do it." The suggestion also caught the attention of Polly Ross-Tyrrell, the APL's Children's Librarian, who also attended the community forum.

"I said, 'Yes, please! Find me a Drag Queen!'" says Ms. Ross-Tyrrell with a laugh, of the family-friendly phenomenon which has taken root in the United States. "From the first minute San Francisco did it, I thought, 'Maybe? Could we?' to my manager and, lo and behold, we eventually could."

Once they got the green light, it was down to business between Ms. Ross-Tyrrell, Ms. Beattie and Eva Lasting. They threw around story suggestions, including books within and outside the APL catalogue, costume suggestions and, indeed, the message of the event.

One story which particularly caught Eva's attention was J.J. Austrian's story *Worm Loves Worm*.

"I am really excited about that one," she says. "For me, that story is for every single child, every single person, because it is just being able to do what makes you happy. Through these easy to access characters to children - they are little insects and they are all having discussions of who wears what - it is so innocuous, and it is so easily applied to anything in life, whether or not you want to dye your hair a different colour, whether or not you want to wear funky shoes, or whatever it is. It is this idea of children to open themselves up to wanting to do something, even if they haven't seen other people do that, or if it is not normal."

Eva Lasting has her origins in a challenge.

She has always loved performing, always singing, dancing and being in plays in high school, but rarely cracking through the chorus. Moving to Toronto was a game changer as she made friends with a number of Drag performers.

"Many of my friends said, "Don't do this. This isn't for you," says Eva on first floating the idea of jumping into the world of Drag. "I was like, "Oh, yeah? I'll show you!" It started as a challenge and I think, for me, there are so many aspects of it, that you can continue to grow and expand. I feel this is a never-ending challenge. I feel like I am supposed to say [my Drag persona is different from my day to day life] but I think in my day-to-day I don't really care as much about my image. A lot of my clothes are from Value Village, and I don't do that to try and be trendy! It is a fun outlet to be really focused on my image. I focus my drag character on being very positive and confident, but really kind and caring. I saw that as something I hadn't seen in some drag communities, but over the last 10 years there have been more drag queens shifting into these positive and caring personas, which is really cool. The first Drag Queen Storytime Ms. Beattie put together with Eva Lasting was packed, she says. The reception was so enthusiastic they had to book a second hour just to accommodate the numbers.

"The kids were so excited," recalls Ms. Beattie. "They wanted to meet the drag queens and hear stories and the reception was overwhelmingly positive. So, I am expecting the same thing here in Aurora."

Looking ahead to Saturday's event, Eva says she fully expects children to be children and ask the questions that pop into their head in real time.

"That is such a fantastic thing," says Eva. "I think if parents come to the event and have questions, I think if the parents are feeling concerned or in some way uneasy, I think it is a great way to build community and build strength in community. I think not understanding a situation, when you see something you haven't seen before and you're not sure about it, to not ask questions and to not talk about it, doesn't give people the opportunity to learn about it and to grow. I hope there are people who have questions and I hope they come forward. I hope that we can all do our best to be open-minded and trying to be understanding of where people come from.

"I think this is about the human experience. It is about community and although I am a drag queen, I am not teaching kids about drag, I'm not teaching kids about the LGBTQ lifestyle, we're here simply to have fun with kids and maybe inspire them to, as they grow up, be free to be who they want to be and seek their own happiness. Hopefully many parents, if not all parents, can get behind their kids being happy to be themselves."

Saturday's Drag Queen Storytime is a free drop-in event for ages three and up. For more information, call 905-727-9494 x280 or email children@apl.ca.