

Library wants LGBTQ+ views on how to better serve community



By Brock Weir

LGBTQ+ youth often feel they don't have the safe spaces to speak out on the issues that matter to them, and how the community can best address those needs. But, the Aurora Public Library wants you to know they are one of those safe spaces and they want to hear from you.

This month, the Aurora Public Library (APL) will launch a series of workshops with LGBTQ+ youth and adults to hear more about the needs of the community and how the Library can serve.

APL recently launched its new strategic plan entitled "A Place of Possibilities," which will help guide the direction of the library through 2021. The strategic plan focuses on community-led initiatives and dynamic conversations with the community on what the Library is, and what it could be.

"We want to learn about our strengths, our gaps in service, needs and priorities," says Claudia Olguin, Coordinator of Community-led Initiatives for APL. "In other words, we want to learn how APL can better serve the LGBTQ+ communities."

Over the past three years, APL has been working to improve their LGBTQ+ collections when it comes to books, movies, and other media. They have received positive feedback, particularly from youth, to say these efforts are appreciated, but they know there is more that can be done, whether it is special programs or ways to adjust service to make APL even more accessible.

"Part of the reason why we're doing this is because we happen to have a staff member, me, who can offer at least one point of view," says Polly Ross, APL's Children's Librarian, a member of York Region's lesbian community. "But, obviously this is an area where one point of view isn't enough. As the Children's Librarian, what I want to do is make sure LGBTQ families and young people feel welcome and find the books they need. In general, I would like us to be more aware that the assumptions we're making aren't always correct when we deal with people. That is something everybody in public service needs to begin to think about when it becomes more and more accepted that gender and sexual identity are a continuum. We're dealing with that, along with everyone else, pretty much, especially in North America."

The next steps in addressing that are the focus groups.

The first focus group will take place at the Library on Wednesday, February 15, from 7 - 8.30 p.m., with a conversation open to LGBTQ+ youth in the Aurora community. A second focus group, geared towards adults, will take place Wednesday, March 15 at the same time.

For Claudia and Polly, it is very important to begin first with the youth, but they do face some challenges in reaching this demographic.

"Polly and I were discussing how we could set up the groups and we came up with the idea of having two focus groups because maybe a 17-year-old wouldn't feel as comfortable being in the same meeting as a 12-year-old, or maybe the needs wouldn't be the same," says Claudia.

Adds Polly: "I definitely wanted to have one for youth because this is a place where I really think we can make much more of a difference. If you're a high school student and you're just coming out, or you're just transitioning, nobody ever really feels safe, but

those people feel really unsafe. If we can be a safe place and offer books that say, yes, this is okay, this is how you're allowed to be, and be a place where they can be who they feel they are is really important.

?If the youth want to come, I want them to know that they are safe, 100 per cent. If they don't want to identify themselves, that is okay. We're not going to demand to know people's names, where they're from, or how they identify. If there is anything you think we can change to make things better for you, please get up your courage and come. We would really appreciate it and do our absolute best to make you feel safe and comfortable.?

With the Library focusing on technological literacy as well as traditional literacy, there is also room for gender literacy, they say.

To reserve your spot in either focus group, visit www.aurorapl.ca or drop in on the evening itself.