

Pflag expands Coffee Night options for 2SLGBTQIA+ community

The global pandemic prompted many groups to re-think how they delivered their services to the community. Many found the path forward through digital platforms, but now that we're getting back to normalcy, what may have worked before may not be ideal today.

This is the case for Pflag York Region, which provides services to members of the local 2SLGBTQIA+ community and their families.

One such service is Pflag's Coffee Nights program which has provided a forum and a safe space for people both in-person and digitally. Through the process, however, it became clear that participants were looking for not just support but community fellowship as well, and this past month they launched a new pilot program to better provide safe, affirming spaces for parents, family, friends, allies, and members of our LGBTQ2IA+ community.

Now through the end of spring, instead of one Coffee Night each month, the second Monday of each month will be dedicated to Coffee Night Support, while the last Wednesday of each month will be Coffee Night Social.

"We found over the course of the pandemic that what folks were looking for were at odds with each other in the same space," says Pflag York Region President Tristan Coolman. "When you have someone who is looking for support, but you have someone wanting to switch gears into talking about more social things, those two don't really compete well in the same space, so we're offering two separate meetings now with two different intentions.

"In May, the social meeting is going to be in person at the Aurora Public Library, our home from before the pandemic, so our Coffee Night program is splitting and with one pretty much essentially online and one in-person option, it will provide as much access as possible. Our community has been asking for more in-person events and more of a variety of events, so we're looking to offer whatever we can."

At their first support meeting of the year, Coolman says "a bunch of new people" found their way to Pflag "approximately 30 per cent of participants.

"We're seeing definitely folks coming out and really seeking and aligning with the messaging of both meetings, knowing they're getting a supportive space in one meeting and getting more of a relaxed and easy-going social space in the other. That, I think, is the message that people are getting right off the bat."

Holding these meetings online during the pandemic, Coolman adds, emphasized the importance of safe spaces like these within the York Region community.

"Especially during the pandemic when we were all at home and some folks were back home where those spaces might not have been exactly safe or affirming spaces, even though we had an online meeting option [that] was accessible, for some they would join and they would be off-video or wouldn't participate with audio instead using the chat feature because they didn't want to make too much noise in their homes," he says. "The online option did create some accessibility but also there were other opportunities as well, and that's why an in-person safe space is just as important as an online safe space."

This spirit will be furthered through a number of outreach programs this spring.

One upcoming event, the date of which is yet to be confirmed, will be a "Fabulous Adventure" in a paint night with 2Spirit Ojibwe Woodland Artist Patrick Hunter who will teach the fundamentals of painting techniques "in a fun and positive environment," the importance of mental health and healing through arts, and the spiritual significance and history of the Woodland artform in Indigenous communities.

In the lead-up to Pride Month in June, Pflag York Region will shift gears with several programs, initiatives and events not only celebrating Pride but creating awareness of Ontario's Bill 42, the Gender-Affirming Health Care Advisory Act.

Pflag York Region is urging Queen's Park to expand the scope of the Bill to include "different forms and definitions around affirming care."

"We immediately think about hormones, access to surgery, access to counsellors and those are all important and need to be studied to better understand where the wait time opportunities are and how they can create more access to York Region and outside urban centres of Ontario, but there are other aspects to gender affirming care we could try to get immediate access to," says Coolman. "It's an all-around access issue right now from every single perspective you can think of under gender-affirming care."

"We're trying to get that passed as it has the potential to have a generational impact. A lot of what we're going to be doing around pride month and the Pride March (in Newmarket) is going to be focused around that bill."

For more information about Pflag York Region, these initiatives and future events, visit pflagyork.ca.

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