

Pflag York Region looking forward to 'busiest Pride Month ever'

Pride Month is just around the corner and Pflag York Region, in conjunction with the Aurora Public Library, is looking forward to their 'busiest Pride Month ever.'

So says Pflag York Region President Tristan Coolman, noting the roster of this season's events is designed to entertain, engage, and spark conversation.

As The Auroran reported earlier this month, festivities will begin at Aurora Public Library (APL) on Saturday, June 1, with Drag King Story Hour, a new spin on the APL's traditional Drag Queen Story Hour, headlined by Gustav, the alter ego of Toronto performer Sare Thorpe.

Events continue on Sunday, June 2, when Pflag and APL team up to present Two-Spirited painter and graphic designer Patrick Hunter with the 'Fabulous Adventures' paint class.

'We knew we wanted to kick off Pride Month in a really strong manner and APL has been an amazing partner with us since before the pandemic, since 2019, when we first started in person programming there,' says Coolman. 'It was a no-brainer to partner with the Aurora Public Library. It was their idea to bring in Gustav, a Drag King, and we wanted to bring in Patrick. We aligned those events together on the start of Pride Month.'

'There is a perception out there that drag is only a female-impersonating practice and form of entertainment and it is not. It has certainly expanded over the years and it has become more diverse. We thought, why not bring in a Drag King and have a great time with reading a few storybooks, great entertainment for kids - a family-oriented event and our whole team will be remembering the event last year, which was so well-attended, and we're looking to echo that attendance last year.'

Drag story hours have been increasingly targeted by protestors in recent years, with two masked individuals positioning themselves outside APL to make their views known in 2023. In response, Pflag formed a 'choir' of community members to drown out any hecklers in song and are prepared to do so again this year 'if we catch wind that it is necessary,' says Coolman.

Anyone looking to join in can email Coolman at president@pflagyork.ca.

'While your kids are inside enjoying Gustav and the entertainment there, you can join us on the outside in case we need to greet other members of our community who want to show their displeasure at such an event,' he says.

2023's Story Hour was a filled-to-capacity program, as was Hunter's last visit to APL the same season.

The feedback to Hunter's previous painting event was so positive they had to turn people away at the door.

With days to go until the 2024 edition, the wait list is already lengthy.

'After the event again, such an incredible amount of feedback that was received, the community really enjoyed getting together, meeting new people, learning a new skill, learning something about painting and some painting techniques they didn't think they could do, and also learning a little bit along the way about Ojibwe culture and some really important lessons there that Patrick embeds into the paint class,' Coolman says. 'It is a little bit of art, but it is a lot of learning, too, and it is a great way to connect with the community.'

Throughout the month, and, in the case of Aurora, on the evening of June 12 at 6.30 p.m., Pflag has partnered with York Region public libraries to host a series of events dedicated to 'Challenging Queer Misinformation.'

These sessions have been inspired by what Coolman describes as 'the rise of anti-queer disinformation' particularly targeted towards the trans community, including legislation either passed or proposed in New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and Alberta that 'really restrict the policies, the movements and the rights of queer folks' and trans people in particular.

'A lot of these policies and a lot of the arguments out there, we have heard them shared by even the leader of the Official Opposition federally. It's not rooted in fact, at all. They're using phrasing like 'parental rights' developing policies that don't really have the need to be developed,' he says. 'We break all those arguments down and show people what is really behind this argument. If it is something not rooted in fact, what's the intention behind it and what's fuelling this? We really want to give people that deeper understanding of these arguments so if they ever hear this, if they have a family member or a friend or someone kind of challenging on them, or even in the workplaces, they can say, 'Hey, have you thought about this perspective of what it means when people say parental rights? Have you thought about the rights of our youth and trans youth in particular, who need to be protected the most?'

'Even if it is one trans youth at a school who needs that type of place to feel welcome and open because of what's happening at home, we're allowing someone to live as affirmingly as possible in a space they consider to be safe.'

This work is going hand in hand with a free lawn sign campaign being spearheaded by Pflag.

The signs in question are 'trans-affirming' messages to encourage the defence and protection of this community and spur 'action in support of the trans, gender-diverse, and non-binary community.

'There is such an increase in rhetoric right now in Canada and it is becoming normalized,' says Coolman. 'We need to take Pride Month this month, and every day moving forward, and draw a line in the sand to say not here and it can't happen here. We need to really understand that there are folks in our community who we care about deeply whose rights are at risk. That is not the statement I make lightly. It might sound like an overstatement, but it is not; that's how people feel and that's what we are seeing in action across the country right now.

'There are people frustrated about what's happening in their personal lives and the cost of living, I certainly am, too' a lot of people are. But you know what? When our rights and freedoms are on the line, that is the line in the sand and people really need to think about whether they are going to sacrifice the rights and freedoms of others for their own personal comfort.'

For more information on these events and initiatives, including how to take part this month and beyond, visit pflagyork.ca.

By Brock Weir