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Story time?s about seeing kids ?in their own element, flourishing with parents? guidance?

As he went about his day on Saturday, Adam Barry stopped into a local shop to pick up a few things.

He was, by his own admission, ?kind of tired and not having the best day,? but things quickly turned around when he was stopped by a mother who had seen a very different version of Adam.

A hairstylist in Newmarket, when the 25-year-old Aurora resident is on his own time, he's bewigged, dressed to the nines, and undeniably glamourous as Athena Vegas, a drag queen with a very busy calendar of everything ranging from nightclub gigs to drag queen story hours, catering to local kids and their families at libraries and other venues across the area.

Such story hours have proved popular annual family traditions across the community, including the Aurora Public Library.

But this encounter was decidedly different.

?They recognized me, told me their daughter has been to a story time reading, a family-safe show in the area, and that they love Athena,? says Adam. ?She said her daughter dances around all the time and says she's Athena as she's twirling around because she's excited for the next show. That's the kind of effect I want to have on kids.?

But these types of shows are coming under fire in North America and, in recent weeks, similar gigs in the United States have become subject to attacks of increased violence by people who say such performances are inappropriate for youngsters ? a view that is simply not shared by many public libraries in the GTA.

?Aurora Public Library believes everyone should be able to see themselves and their community reflected in the Library's collections and programming,? says Reccia Mandelcorn, Manager of Community Collaboration for the Aurora Public Library. ?In 2017, we received a request to host a Drag Queen Story Hour, and it has become a much-anticipated family event every year since. We believe this initiative provides an opportunity for anyone, including and especially children, to consider the breadth that is the human experience.

The response from attendees has been overwhelming positive, supporting acceptance of diversity and pride in being our true selves.?

This is a view shared by Adam, who will be referred to as Athena beyond this point in the story, who says the backlash is ?shocking? and that all drag performers who participate in story hours are trying to do is give kids and their parents ?a visual escape to see something larger than life, artistically speaking.?

?It's always a safe, positive space,? says Athena. ?The people on the other side pressuring story time readings are more individuals who oversexualize us as entertainers because they're only seeing certain elements of what we can do, what we're capable of, and the versatility we bring in forms of entertainment. It's not just story time readings, I've seen drag shows on the ski slopes. But if it clicks, it fits, and is safe, people shouldn't be pressuring people that are only trying to do good.

?The oversexualization of the entertainer themselves is not being done by the entertainer when they read a book, nor [through] what they've decided to wear in front of children, it's usually the adults who have the capability to oversexualize the situation.?

For Athena, finding and honing her drag was a matter of finding ?all the facets that make me and that I own best,? including dance, gymnastics, makeup, hair, theatre, ?wrapped up in a bow.?

It was the realization that they could make a career out of all the elements that were already a part of them ? through drag.

The love of performing came as no surprise to his family who recall how young Adam was transfixed by performers of all kinds wherever they went and when he wanted to get deeper into expressing himself through the arts found nothing but support from his family, friends and loved ones.

Athena Vegas made her debut at a Richmond Hill pub at the request of York Pride.

She wasn't the most polished of drag queens at the time and without inspiration close to home, took her drag cues from such renowned drag queens as Alyssa Edwards for dance, Bianca Del Rio for confidence and comedy, and, of course, RuPaul for motivation and positivity.

Also helping shape Athena's persona was rapper Nicki Minaj.

In Minaj, Athena found the inspiration to find something within themselves to ?leave an impression on the world? with ?all the best qualities of you.?

?Being Athena has taught me to soften up, lighten up, and loosen up my shoulders ? and it's my turn to have fun with all of that. You've put it together, now let me have fun. I think drag [brings to audiences] a sense of escape, a safe escape. People get an example of what else is in the world. You don't really see people like myself out there on the street putting on that much expression, polish, that kind of world of the arts and theatre. It's a safe escape, but also something to make that little part in your brain go, ?Woo!' and we all need that throughout the week.?

As Athena goes from strength to strength as a performer, she says her audience experiences in Aurora have been those where good has always outweighed the bad, but the situation and backlash in other communities ?definitely makes you nervous.?

?It makes you question your own safety but, at the same time, you can't get carried away with an unhealthy thought. The fight has to be a good fight and it has to be a healthy one because as long as we can make certain people who are overdramatizing or overthinking the situation, we can come to a common ground of realization and conversation rather than intimidating and threatening each other, that I'm sure we'll understand each other a lot more. Not everything is going to be for everyone, and that's also where they need to understand their niche of what kind of drag they like.

?At story times I'll see moms and dads, but I'll also see two mothers, two fathers, but I love seeing single parents, especially single fathers, who say, ?This is my son and he and I are Drag Race buddies,' and things like that. I just love hearing those kinds of connections with their kids, I love hearing kids openly express themselves, and it's really their parents who are allowing their brains

to find their likes and dislikes rather than fearing them all before they can make a decision.

?Hate is taught, but what makes [story times] most fulfilling is seeing kids in their own elements flourishing with their parents' guidance, but also with their parents taking a step back at times to allow their kids to experience it themselves.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter