

Support for York Region LGBTQ2 community set to double with Aurora coffee nights



By Brock Weir

They come to tell their stories. They come to have a good cry. They come to lend a hand, ear, or a shoulder. There is no one reason that LGBTQ2 residents of all ages come together to create safe spaces, but opportunities to do so in York Region are set to double next month thanks to Pflag and the Aurora Public Library.

Eight months ago, Pflag, York Region's LGBTQ2 support, resource and education network, has been hosting a series of coffee nights in Richmond Hill. The series of monthly coffee nights has experienced exceptional growth over the last few months now, in response to demand, the program is expanding northward to Aurora on the second Monday of every month starting this December. "This brings two very significant things to both the Aurora Public Library and Pflag York Region," says Pflag York Region President Michael Blackburn. "We have always been fairly southern-centric and we have received requests from the community to expand somewhere more north to make it accessible to our northern communities. We're making our services to vulnerable communities way more accessible and more frequent."

Over the past two years, Pflag has been focused on removing barriers wherever they can find them. Members of the LGBTQ2 community have said they don't have a place like Toronto's Church Street to connect on a non-support basis, and Pflag has responded with these Coffee Nights.

They are intended to be accessible, says Mr. Blackburn, and address the needs of those in attendance "without any pre-set agenda. "These meetings are like a Choose Your Own Adventure," he says. "You can sit there and say nothing, you can grab a box of tissues and have a good cry, or you can come just to connect, or give back and help people by telling your story. Most people expect something a little daunting and it is really quite the opposite. I was completely out when I went to my first Pflag meeting and I still felt the anxiety of being the newbie, the anxiety of everyone looking at me and wondering, "What do I say?" We're a very safe space where we set the intent of our meeting, we identify with our pronouns, and it is kind of like that plug-and-play Choose Your Own Adventure. You can tell your story or just sit there and listen.

"People are on all different parts of the journey and it is a really beautiful, authentic space. As a volunteer for Pflag, every month I go to a coffee night and it re-energizes me and reminds me why I do what I do because you're at the grassroots providing support to a community. When you see someone go from crisis mode to turning around and providing support to someone else in the community, it is one of the most powerful things you'll ever see.

"This is a safe space, it is an authentic space, it is a welcoming space. You can come for support, you can come for social, and it is a place where you can be authentic. There is zero judgement in this space, which is also what makes it so powerful. It is like the world stops around you and you are in this loving space where the LGBTQ2 community transcends any culture, ability, gender. It allows you to open your eyes and understand other people's lived experiences as well. Everybody's lived experience is very different."

This is one of the myriad areas in which Pflag and the Aurora Public Library (APL) have found common ground in forming this collaboration. According to Reccia Mandelcorn, APL's Manager of Community Collaboration, the Library prides itself on being community-led, conscious of the fact they "can't make assumptions about what people want."

Intent on listening and creating a platform, APL has been carrying out a series of outreach opportunities. Before beginning this process, they realised they weren't serving the local LGBTQ2 communities appropriately.

There were definitely barriers, says Ms. Mandelcorn, noting one such barrier was not having a gender-free washroom on site a barrier that has since been torn down. We realized we had to clear barriers and we had to listen to what the community wanted and we had to find out how to facilitate that.

The starting off point was hosting two focus groups one for teens that identified as members of the LGBTQ2 community, and one for adults. They took stock of the feedback and set out to provide identified services.

They listened, she says, and when APL learned that Pflag was looking for a place to expand, it was a golden opportunity.

Being a community hub is really important and that is one reason why I am so happy Pflag is coming here because we are central, we're on transit, not everybody has a car or may want their parents to drop them off, she says. We are a community hub and I think this is a perfect tie-in.

Mr. Blackburn agrees: We needed a space that inherently is community. Libraries are a space where you can grow, where you can learn, where you can let your imagination run wild and you can be who you want to be. I think that works really nicely with Pflag's mission.

The first Coffee Night Aurora event will take place Monday, December 10 at the Aurora Public Library starting at 7.15 p.m. in the Magna Room. The series will continue the second Monday of each month. Additional Coffee Nights are held in Richmond Hill at 10909 Yonge Street (Unit 203) on the fourth Wednesday or every month. For more information, visit pflagyork.ca or call 1-866-YR-PFLAG.