

Valentine's Dance a source of 'Pride' for LGBTQ2S+ teens

As Valentine's Day approaches, people across York Region are thinking about how they can do something special for the one they love.

Maybe it's a bouquet of flowers and a box of chocolates. Maybe it's a nice romantic meal. Maybe it's a dance with other couples looking to mark the day in a special way.

For young members of the local LGBTQ2S+, however, options can sometimes feel limited as societal pressures make them feel they need to mark the day in private rather than with a more public display of their affection, but next week community groups will come together to provide a safe and welcoming environment for teens to celebrate.

Next Friday, February 7, from 7 to 10 p.m., teens are invited to enjoy the #LoveisLove 2SLGBTQ+ Teen Valentine's Day Dance at the Newmarket Community Centre & Lions Hall.

The dance, now in its second year, is hosted in partnership with the York Regional Police's 2SLGBTQ+ Community Consultative Roundtable, which includes Pflag York Region, the York Region District School Board, York Pride, and the AIDS Committee of York Region.

It will be an evening of dancing, food and fun.

Although he wasn't able to attend last year's inaugural event, Pflag York Region president Tristan Coolman says he is looking forward to this year's dance, particularly after hearing so many positive success stories coming out of the 2019 event.

'Last year, I heard very good feedback about the attendance,' says Mr. Coolman. 'I believe there were at least 50 to 60 kids who attended, which, for an event that was put together on short notice, and the first annual event of its kind, also being in the northern area of York Region, it was really well attended. At this point, it is a matter of getting the word out there. Every high school student or teen in York Region knows it is available to them - it is for them, free to attend, so come out and have a free slice of pizza, mingle with friends, the more the merrier!'

The Chief's 2SLGBTQ+ Community Consultative Roundtable brings together a number of different groups looking to provide support and opportunities for the queer community.

'Through the roundtable, Police thought it would be a great idea to facilitate a dance for teens in a safe environment to have officers there for the teens to interact with if they like,' Mr. Coolman explains. 'If they just want to show up and dance and eat some pizza, that's fine too. It's a way for York Regional Police to break down barriers and to

kind of get out into the communities. It is not just the community reaching out to the Police it is the police reaching out to the community. I think that's what one of the big messages is with the event and when YRP puts on events like this, or the We Belong pride breakfast, the various days of remembrance and flag raising ceremonies they have put on in the last few years, their efforts to try and reach out to the community, recognizing the work they need to do to really dispel and work through the negative perception that there is.?

?Events [like the February 7 dance] are huge because when I was younger ? and generations older than I am ? almost any interaction you would have with Police or any stories that kind of came your way, they were kind of negative from the queer lived experience. It is not just hearing Police say, 'We're working on a few things here and there,' but to see that work in motion and be a participant in it, I don't think you can really put a value on it.

?It is just incredible work and it is an incredible opportunity from the PFLAG perspective. This is something we have been working on for more than 25 years. Marilyn Byers, one of our first presidents, was first approached by YRP and was talking with one of the Deputy Chiefs at the time and she was told blatantly, 'There are no gay people in York Region,' and we have gone from that 25 years ago to the Police holding a dance for teens. It is quite incredible.?

For more information on the #LoveisLove 2SLGBTQ+ Teen Valentine's Day Dance, and to RSVP, email pride@yrp.ca.

By Brock Weir