

York Pride turns message of hate into awareness opportunity

By Brock Weir

A message of hate, delivered anonymously to young members of York Pride last week, has been turned into an opportunity to teach members of the public about the importance of reporting hate crimes to local police.

On Friday, August 23, members of York Pride were shocked to find an explicit, hateful voicemail left by a man on their Youth Line. The profanity-laced voicemail, which was posted to social media by the group in its entirety, not only ridiculed the group for the work they were doing in York Region for the LGBTQ+ community, but threatened violence in the workplace.

“This person made several attempts, seven in total, [to leave a message],” says Jacob Gal of York Pride, noting the individual first tried to leave a message around 10.30 p.m. on their Media Relations line, before bouncing around to their Youth Line. “When the message came in, I had a quick talk with our core member, Brianne, who also coordinates the Youth Group with me, before we decided to report this. Obviously with calls like that, and the number of incidents that happen in Downtown Toronto with people being beat up on transit or walking the streets holding hands, we do see physical violence happen throughout, whether it is in our Region or just around the world.

“When someone can hate so much, there are physical consequences that come from that. When a message like this, when someone is suggesting people should be shot or pissed on, the fact that someone is [threatening to] come into an office, that definitely raised some eyebrows and was something that shouldn't be ignored. When we ignore things like this, that is when we miss opportunities to potentially stop something from happening.

“We didn't know what to interpret from this, but we thought the first step was trying to ensure that people can still feel safe and comfortable, and know our core members weren't going to be in harm's way.”

York Pride reported the call to York Regional Police last Tuesday and they quickly sprang into action.

Police say after the incident was reported, it was investigated by trained hate crime investigators. While the suspect was identified, no charges have been laid at this time, said Constable Laura Nicolle.

“York Regional Police will not tolerate hate in any form and we will thoroughly investigate any incidents that are reported to us,” she said. “These type of incidents and hateful expressions are incredibly hurtful, certainly to everyone that was targeted here, but also, to all of us working or living in York Region that are proud of how inclusive this region is. This incident serves as a further reminder that the work being by, and

with, our partners in all of our diverse communities is crucial to ensure that the message is clear, there is no place for any expressions of hate in York Region.?

?We sometimes wonder how intense people are going to go with their homophobia,? adds Mr. Gal. ?We can respect we have freedom of speech here in Canada and people are absolutely willing to have their own opinion. We know that people don't have to be friends with the people they don't like and they don't mean to necessarily be around people they don't like, but I think one thing we do strive to do is create some education for some sharing that people would at least have the decency to be respectful, meaning that we're not physically hurting people, we're not emotionally hurting people, we're keeping the things that hurt people to ourselves and just living our lives.

?People have some very strong views about this (LGBTQ) community. It is very important that even though we have a government that speaks about being inclusive and we're a country built on people that respect people, there are a lot of people that have very strict views on the fact they are not cool with this and the hate is there ? it is just very hidden.?

By coming forward with what they experienced last week, York Pride is hoping to break the stigma that keeps this hate hidden, discouraging possible victims from reporting their experience to the authorities.

?There is a bit of a challenge in our system when people don't report hate crimes or things that can be seen as barriers to the community,? says Mr. Gal. ?This is an opportunity to educate people. The reason why we have the Pride Festival and some people just see it as people wanting to wave flags in people's faces and agitate people, some people just don't understand that not everybody has the ability to be open and be able to express themselves as easily as someone else does and doesn't see the true meaning of why we have organizations that are constantly working with youth and adults to move forward and provide education, resources, social resources and essential health resources.

?We have quite a bit of work to do to tell people that this is about building meaningful relationships. When we get messages like this, it worries us because we don't know what the threats out there. We can't live in isolation or fear, but we know there are people out there who sometimes don't generally agree with the community. How far are they going to go to showcase their hate? That was a really concerning thing.?