

York Region gears up for Pride Week



By Brock Weir

The raising of the rainbow flag has significant meaning for Amanda Kenegje and Mike Blackburn.

As president and vice president, respectively, of the York Region chapter of PFLAG (Parents & Friends of Lesbians and Gays), not a day goes by where they and their dedicated group of volunteers are not contacted by, in the words of Amanda, "angry, fearful, confused, or ashamed parents and families from all walks of life and from across the Region that have questions or concerns about sexual orientation or gender identity."

But, June is Pride Month and this Sunday marks the start of Pride Week in York Region. For them, it is a time to celebrate the whole spectrum of the LGBTQ community, its allies, and important community connections that have been fostered.

"To the LGBTQ community and its allies, the raising of the flag has significant meaning," said Amanda on Wednesday afternoon at the official kick off of Pride Month in York Region, hosted by the York Regional Police at their Aurora headquarters. "The brilliant rainbow colours of the flag are symbolic of inclusivity and support for freedom and gender identity and sexual orientation, as well as the celebration of diversity in our community."

"The flying of the rainbow flag provides a spirited symbol of the commitment to celebrate diversity and to celebrate equal human rights. It symbolizes our community as one founded on acceptance, one that truly encourages everyone to feel welcome and to feel proud of who they are, and their authentic self."

There will be many ways to show your pride throughout York Region over the coming week, including York Region's annual Pride Parade, which takes place along Yonge Street next Saturday, June 18 in Richmond Hill at 2 p.m.

"We work on making social events and we take social interaction and fuse that with our events to create education on the LGBT community and residents in the Region," said Jacob Gal of York Pride Fest, also paying tribute to presence the York Regional Police lend to the festivities. "It is expanding every year and it is truly amazing. When you see the [YRP and the YRP's LGBTQ Internal Support Network (ISN)] rainbow cruiser in the community it creates the visibility that we have a government organization that supports our cause and it gets people who might not understand the LGBT community to really connect."

For Mr. Gal, it is all about building these connections. When people see the York Regional Police participating in the party, it breaks down barriers, helping people make a connection to causes they might not fully understand.

"Following [the Pride Parade] is our Pride in the Park, which is our signature event which programs arts and culture on our stage,

food vending, community, and an interactive kids' zone," added Mr. Gal. "I think what's great about this is we can now connect with the community at a family friendly level and really engage the community and get them to see our cause and understand where we're coming from and show we can live in the community harmoniously, get together, and live prosperously and enjoy each other, and show what pride is all about : diversity, inclusion and respect."

These connections are also important to the leaders of PFLAG York Region, who are key community partners on these programs. Over the years, Mike said he has seen the chapter evolve and its power for those who reach out grow through their monthly support meetings bringing together "family, friends but also individuals who identify as LGBTQ and might be struggling to define and accept their sexual orientation or gender identity."

"It this wide-ranging reflection of the countless sides of the coming out process that provides such a rich support for those who attend our meetings," he said "The diversity of our chapter's work and support encompasses the whole spectrum of the LGBTQ community and all of its allies. The Board of our organization's committed to preserving and expanding their support and presence in York Region through education, awareness, and by continually developing resource foundations, strong community partnerships and our networks, such as the one with YRP.

"In 2015, the YRP was the first major police organization to raise the pride flag in celebration of pride month and that is pretty amazing to be able to stand proud with all of these community members and be your authentic selves and know that the world is not out to get you and you have the support from the core of the community, the people who keep us safe."

For more on York Pride Fest, visit yorkpridefest.com. To connect with PFLAG York Region, visit pflagyork.ca