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The Fabulousness and the Fury: Preparing for a Drag Queen Storytime

Le fabuleux et la fureur : se préparer pour une heure du conte drag queen

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[See table of contents](#)

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The Fabulousness and the Fury: Preparing for a Drag Queen Storytime

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Abstract

After announcing the launch of a Drag Queen Storytime, the Halton Hills Public Library (HHPL) received positive feedback from the community, but also faced criticism from a small but vocal group of citizens. Complaints reached as high as the mayoral office, challenging the library's position as a trusted community institution, and testing the rigour of its training, communications, policies, and procedures. Despite the pushback, the library ran a highly successful program and afterward redoubled its commitment to fighting homophobia and promoting equality. This article details how the HHPL came to offer the program, what the response was, as well as suggestions for measuring success and processing complaints.

Keywords

Drag Queen Storytime; LGBTQ; homophobia; children's services; public libraries; complaints; programming; children's programming; inclusion; diversity

Introduction

At their very best, Drag Queen Storytimes are phenomenally entertaining programs. Beyond being an absolute hoot, they also encourage a love of literacy; foster empathy, diversity, and inclusion; support your local 2SLGBTQ+¹ community and its allies; and

¹ This is the term that has been chosen for us by the HHPL. It stands for Two-Spirited, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, and more.

may even advance your library's strategic goals. As RuPaul would say, that's "10s, 10s, 10s, across the board!"

Of course, anyone who's been paying attention knows that, despite their many benefits, Drag Queen Storytimes have been brewing tempests in teapots from one side of the country to the other. In Ottawa, for example, attendees expecting to participate in a fun-filled program were instead told by an irate protester that they would be "cast into a lake of fire." (Jones, 2019). I don't know about you, but I'm preferential to family programs that *don't* feature threats of eternal damnation. So, what should libraries do to prepare? I'll be telling you about our amazing Drag Queen Storytime experience, how we strove to listen to and be respectful of those who expressed their displeasure with the concept, and how you can make your program successful while minimizing pushback and maximizing positivity.

What Is Drag Queen Storytime?

A Drag Queen Storytime takes traditional elements of performance for children (e.g., storytelling, pantomime, clowning, costumes, comedy, songs, and so on) and adds to that an opportunity to promote inclusion and diversity by featuring performers in gender-bending or exaggerated attire. Many libraries, as well as community and cultural agencies that serve children, have found Drag Queen Storytimes to be a successful way to offer entertaining family programming that also helps participants to better understand and appreciate gender roles and diversity. At the Halton Hills Public Library, we decided to book the well-known drag duo, Fay and Fluffy, for our first ever Drag Queen Storytime. Both Fay and Fluffy have ongoing experience working with children, have performed in libraries, and were located only an hour away, making them the perfect choice for us.

About Halton Hills

The Town of Halton Hills is an amalgamated municipality, located in the northwestern portion of the Greater Toronto Area. With just over 60,000 residents, it is the least-populous of the four municipalities that make up the Halton Region, and the only one that is entirely north of Highway 401. The public library has two branches, one in each of the Town's largest population centers, which are Georgetown and Acton. English is the mother tongue of 84% of the population, with a large majority of residents coming from a European background.

It Began with the Plan

The impetus for this program was our Strategic Plan, which had an emphasis on diversity and inclusion. At the departmental level, we wanted to make improving services to 2SLGBTQ+ patrons a goal. With that in mind, it was time for us to review and evaluate our current services, and then determine the positive changes we could make.

In the report *Every Class in Every School*, researchers found that almost two-thirds of 2SLGBTQ+ students report feeling unsafe at school (Taylor, et al., 2011). In another finding from that study, 74% of trans students reported having been verbally harassed about their gender expression. Public libraries aren't schools, but I believe that our results would be similar, and as such, it's no surprise that patrons may experience anxiety when borrowing 2SLGBTQ+ themed material. While our self-serve options could alleviate some of that anxiety, we wanted to do more.

After review, we determined that our collections were solid, but our current slate of programs (occasional one-offs and a 2SLGBTQ+ teen drop-in event offered in partnership with a local agency) were deemed to be individually successful but lacking in breadth. In order to turn the goals of the Strategic Plan into implementable actions, we developed several formal objectives to support the 2SLGBTQ+ community, including offering a Drag Queen Storytime, creating pride displays, and developing a virtual list of 2SLGBTQ+ ebooks.

In my role as Manager of Children's and Youth Services, I prepared a memo on the topic of 2SLGBTQ+ services at the library and presented it to both our Library Board and 'Community and Corporate Affairs,' a sub-committee of Town Council. Included within the memo was mention of our plan to offer Drag Queen Storytime, listing its benefits, and noting the potential for community protest. I felt that it was important that these crucial stakeholders be aware of the positive things we were doing, and what we planned to do in the future.

Public Comment Prior to the Show

Prior to the show, public comment and support for the program was largely positive. Some community members were already familiar with Fay and Fluffy and/or the idea of Drag Queen Storytime, expressing excitement and appreciation for the program. Comments within the Library and on the Library's social media posts were very positive, as were comments on some public online forums such as a local parents' group.

A small number of negative and/or critical statements were received via social media, including comments from far outside the community and even the country. It became apparent that there was a group of social media users from Canada and the United States who were opposed to Drag Queen Storytimes and were flagging posts for their group. Anything inappropriate was deleted.

I became aware of four community members who had contacted the library to express their concerns over the program. Each community member who visited or phoned in to complain was spoken to in-person or via telephone by either myself or the Chief Librarian.

Whenever a complaint is received, we must appreciate the fact that those who have taken the time to register a concern are, in most cases, doing so from a place of sincerity and a wish for the betterment of their community. We must keep an open mind and address their concerns with the same level of respect that we ourselves would wish

to receive. While our hackles may be raised by those members of the public who challenge our decisions, especially when their views are fundamentally different from our own, we must always retain our professionalism and composure. If we fail to do so, we fail our mandate. That being said, if a conversation reaches a logical dead end, is circling endlessly, or becomes confrontational, it is appropriate to politely terminate it. Let them know that they have been heard, that their concerns will be forwarded to those who need to hear them, then say goodbye. If their behaviour is unduly confrontational or harassing, further steps, such as issuing a letter of trespass, may be warranted.

The complainants expressed many concerns, including:

- The program is inappropriate for children.
- The program and its advertisements made them feel unwelcome in the library.
- The program will sexualize children.
- The library should not be supporting the “gay agenda.”
- The performers will sexually assault children *during* the performance, and that, around the world, there has been a spree of drag queens doing just that.
- Even members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community would not approve of Drag Queen Storytime.²

The Performance

The program was launched at the Georgetown Branch at 11:00 am on Saturday, July 20, 2019, an often-bustling time for Children’s and Youth Services. The event was drop-in and non-ticketed. Due to the significant buzz that the program was generating, we knew to expect a large crowd. The central portion of the children’s area was cleared of movable furniture and display units, creating a large storytelling area with soft mats and good visibility.

Fay and Fluffy performed for approximately 45 minutes, after which they took pictures and chatted with the attendees. The event was leisurely and fun, with plenty of stories, songs, and conversation. The kids were very engaged, and there were even a few questions from the young attendees about the performers’ clothes and gender, such as, “Are you a boy or a girl?” which the performers used as an opportunity to talk about gender in a comprehensible, humorous, and helpful manner.

Their book choices were appropriate to both the audience and the topic. The reading list included the following titles, which were already held by the HHPL:

- *Mary Wears What She Wants* by Keith Negley
- *I Am Invited to a Party!* by Mo Willems
- *Not Quite Narwhal* by Jessie Sima

² This sentiment drastically underestimates the queer community’s seemingly insatiable appetite for drag.

Measuring Success

Anecdotal

Conversational feedback was very positive. One parent, who is a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community and a lifelong Georgetown resident, expressed to me her great enthusiasm and appreciation for the program, stating that she has never felt safe enough in this community to even hold her wife's hand in public.

Attendance

With approximately 160 attendees, our Drag Queen Storytime is now the most-attended drop-in, family program we have ever offered. It was scheduled in lieu of our core early literacy program, Family Storytime, which typically sees about 30 attendees per session. In discussions with the attendees, staff learned that some participants were visitors from nearby communities, with a few travelling up to an hour to be there.

Evaluations

Paper evaluation forms were handed out and 19 were returned. The results were informative and supportive. Half of the attendees learned of the event from social media, and another quarter from word of mouth. Of the respondents, 100% stated that they would attend the same program again in the future. When asked to rate the program, 18 out of the 19 respondents chose the highest rating, "Excellent," with the one remaining respondent selecting the second highest, "Very Good."

When asked what they felt the benefit of such programs was to their child and/or their community, comments included:

- "Seeing something so fun and accepting and diverse and LGBTQ positive with my kids made me feel whole."
- "Love of reading, diversity, and acceptance."
- "It's a great way to teach our kids how to get along with everyone."
- "Promoting empathy, teaching about diversity."
- "Brings diversity to our community."
- "Creates a loving community and loving members."

Other comments included:

- "Thanks HHPL for being a LGBTQ+ safe space and promoting inclusivity. So proud to live in a place like Halton Hills because of programs like this <3"
- "Very sweet and entertaining. Good exposure in a not-so-diverse community"
- "So fun for my wife and I (same sex) to bring our grandson"
- "I loved this! thank you for bringing this to Georgetown"
- "Every year!"

Social Media

The HHPL's first Facebook post following the performance garnered over 90 loves or likes. The HHPL's Instagram post for Drag Queen Storytime received over 60 likes, the most of any Instagram post the HHPL had made at that point. Commenters expressed their enthusiastic appreciation for the program, the library, and the community.

Formal Complaints

Like most libraries, the HHPL has a formal mechanism for dealing with public concerns over materials, a process that begins with a "Request for Reconsideration of Materials" form. As every challenge holds within it an opportunity, we used the handful of complaints that we received as an impetus to develop a new form to address program-related concerns. After making the new "Request for Reconsideration of a Program" form available, one was completed and returned to the library. I reviewed it, and then prepared a formal reply. My reply included a general description of the program, our rationale for offering it, our evaluation of the program including select responses from attendees, and a rebuttal of some of the comments made in the original complaint. These rebuttals included quotations from researchers and other informed commentators.

Two informal comment forms were received that were critical of the program. These were replied to with a simplified version of the formal reply.

Delegations and Communications to the Board

Apart from the receipt of the aforementioned "Request for Reconsideration of a Program" form, there have been no further delegations or formal communications to the Board regarding the program. While I encouraged the 'informal' complainants to complete a formal reconsideration form, a few were reluctant to do so, fearing that their name would be leaked ("doxxed") and that they would suffer retribution and even violence as a result. I assured them that the complaint would be kept as anonymous as possible, and that a "leak" of that sort has never occurred.

Follow up Memo

I drafted a follow-up memo for the Board and the sub-committee of Town Council regarding the success of Drag Queen Storytime. When presenting to the latter, I prepared an extensive series of notes addressing any questions that might be asked, but that proved unnecessary. The memo was simply 'approved for information' and the two Councillors who spoke to it were very positive.

How to Address Complaints and Protest

While other libraries holding Drag Queen Storytimes have faced greater pushback, including confrontations and protest, I hope that our lessons learned will support libraries who are interested in offering this very worthwhile program.

- **Policy and Procedure**
 - Policy is our bedrock. It guides our actions and defends us when challenged. Review your own policies related to intellectual freedom, programming, diversity and inclusion, and dealing with disruptive patrons. (Add these, if necessary.) This will help you to explain why you're offering this program, how you should offer it, and what to do when challenged.
- **Communicate with those in your library**
 - Administration
 - Knowing that there may be pushback, it is crucial that buy-in for the program occurs at the highest level.
 - Marketing
 - Give your marketing staff (if you're lucky enough to have any) time to prepare promotion materials and responses to complaints. If you don't have staff expertise to draw on, contact larger systems for their support.
 - Frontline staff
 - It is likely that frontline staff will be the first to receive any complaints. Provide them with the basic facts about the program, and encourage them to redirect complaints to an objective, preset mechanism such as a complaint form.
- **Communicate with stakeholders**
 - It's good practice to inform someone if they are likely to receive a complaint due to their position or office. Prior to promotion of the program, we informed our primary administrative stakeholders (i.e., the Board and local governance) via a memo. The memo informed them of the program's many benefits, and also the potential for complaints and protests. In retrospect, I believe that Council members would have appreciated a very brief handout or email with talking points.
 - Having this information in advance gave our stakeholders time to ask questions, prepare for any criticisms or protests, and plan for their own attendance.
- **Communicate with the performers**
 - Let them know of any negative responses so that they are aware of what to expect on the day of the event.
- **Communicate with the public**
 - If you're running a Drag Queen Storytime, don't hide it under the proverbial bushel. Promote! And while you're at it, let the public know *why* you're doing it: the fun, the stories, the inclusion, and the creation of empathy.
 - Prepare an official statement and refer back to it when asked for comment.
 - At the HHPL we have a Facebook-based Parent Advisory Council that we contacted to promote and evaluate the program.
- **Address complaints appropriately and respectfully**
 - Informally

- All those who approached us by phone or in-person were given replies.
 - We listened to what the complainants had to say and responded to their concerns appropriately.
- Formally
 - We created an all-new Request for Reconsideration of a Program form and replied promptly to the one that we received.
 - Having a formal complaints process offered frontline staff a simple way to address any concerns brought to them. It also allowed us to respond to any public concerns in a formal and systematic manner.
- **Monitor social media**
 - Our Marketing and Communications Coordinator kept an eye out for any inappropriate posts and deleted them as necessary.
 - We also tracked positive comments found in local online communities.
- **Do not get involved in a war of words**
 - Unless you are replying formally, let your policies and other official statements speak for you. Refer back to them when asked for comment.
 - Inevitably a member of the public will say something inflammatory like: “You’re trying to make kids gay!” or “Why isn’t there a straight pride storytime?” While it’s tempting to reply, remember that it is not your job to educate them on the complexities of human sexuality, or to explain that heterosexuals, as a group, are doing just fine. Again, refer to your official statements.
 - Complaints made via social media do not carry the same weight as those made formally, or even in-person. If negative comments are made on your social media, delete them. Your library’s social media is YOUR soap box, no one else’s.
 - When in conversation with complainants:
 - Let them do most of the talking. You are there to hear them, not debate them.
 - If they insist on going off on tangents (e.g., in this case, they might start railing against gay marriage) remind them that they are there to speak to the topic at hand, and anything else is off topic.
 - Keep in mind how you would like to be treated if your roles were reversed, and act accordingly.
- **Ensure the security of attendees**
 - Sufficient staffing is important to ensure the smooth operation of any large-scale program, but especially so when there is the possibility of protests. On the day of the program, we had our regular staffing complement, as well as the Marketing and Communication Specialist, the Chief Librarian, and myself (the Manager of Children’s and Youth Services).
 - As we do not have formal security guards, we phoned the police in advance to warn them of the potential for protest. The officer I spoke to was very supportive and recommended that we call if we have any issues. This proved unnecessary.

- **Report back on success**
 - We used anecdotal comments, paper evaluations, attendance numbers, and social media engagements to gather data and evaluate the program. This information was then reported back to staff and stakeholders.
- **Keep up the momentum**
 - Following the program, we improved and expanded our training and approach:
 - Our preferred acronym was changed to 2SLGBTQ+ in order to acknowledge the Indigenous community.
 - A 2SLGBTQ+ speaker was added to our all-staff training day.
 - A “Sexuality and Gender Diversity” online training module was added to our onboarding process.

Conclusion

“Every time I bat my false eyelashes, it’s a political statement.” -RuPaul

That quotation has new meaning for me, especially in light of the incredibly positive response to our Drag Queen Storytime and the small but vocal group of community members who opposed it. The concept of gender, and masculinity in particular, (would a Drag King have generated as much complaint?) is so rigid and highly delineated for certain sections of the population that the thought of a male person acting in a non-masculine way seems to automatically equate to a dangerous, debased, and deranged mind. Through acts both large and small, libraries can create safe spaces and build inclusive supports for the 2SLGBTQ+ community, even though doing so means existing in opposition to a small segment of your community. No one wants disagreements with our public but we must accept the fact that it may prove unavoidable if we are to carry out our mandate of access to all.

While at its core this program is simply colourful people, colourful clothes, and a colourful message of love, some citizens will feel that it is an attack on their beliefs. Always remember that it is their right to speak their minds and follow their consciences. Hearing them out (within reason) is the right thing to do from both a customer service and a professional standpoint. Having your messaging crafted in advance will make a huge difference in this regard.

The wondrous capability of children to be open and accepting never ceases to inspire me. Without a drop of self-consciousness, a little boy brought a baby doll in a stroller to our program. A traditional male activity? No. But why can’t it be? (Another boy claimed to be a father of two; you never know what you’re going to get with a crowd of kids!). If we are to have a healthy and happy community, we must make space for children to explore their interests and identities without unduly shackling them to restrictive gender roles. We know what can happen when 2SLGBTQ+ youth aren’t supported; we’ve all seen the statistics. As a community institution, we can be that crucial difference in a child’s life, we can be that caring and supportive agency which so many 2SLGBTQ+ people longed for and never received.

For our part, we plan on continuing to offer this wonderful program. It's a ton of fun, gets families excited about the library, and builds a little understanding along the way. I encourage everyone who is reading this to get their own Drag Queen Storytime program off the ground and don't let a little bit of fury get in the way of all that fabulousness.

Author's Note

As of this writing, we have just completed our second Drag Queen Storytime, which occurred virtually due to COVID-19. The pre-show response followed a similar pattern of general excitement from the community, coupled with a few people wishing to register their displeasure. Feedback on the program was positive, although the attendees missed the level of interaction that is only possible when in person.

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