

Community celebrates return of Maynooth Pride

By Nate Smelle

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the local Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Two-Spirited+ community and their allies have waited more than two years to celebrate Pride in Maynooth. Although the annual celebration was supposed to return during the August long weekend, organizers had to postpone the event until the Labour Day weekend due to a stormy weather forecast.

This time, with the public's anticipation peaking, and nothing in the way, the celebration went ahead without any hiccups. Maynooth Pride officially got underway on the evening of Thursday, Sept. 2 with the Queers Read from Books that Inspire Them event at the Hastings Highlands Public Library.

Roy Mitchell is a member of the organizing committee responsible for bringing back the annual Maynooth Pride celebration. Reflecting on how difficult the isolation has been for members of the LGBTQ2S+ community during the pandemic, he described the long-awaited opening night of this year's Maynooth Pride as "magical."

"It was really a hard year for a lot of queers; if you were a single person, and queer, and you didn't have family, or you were out to your family, or maybe you were even stuck with family that was not supportive," explained Mitchell. "So, that Thursday reading was really magical because we gathered with people that love us. We gathered and people read books, and shared intimate things about why the book was important. It was a diverse crowd. It was an opportunity for our community to come together."

The festivities resumed on the morning of Saturday, Sept. 4 with a crowd of approximately 30 assembling outside of Hastings Highlands municipal building to take part in the first Queer History Tour of Maynooth. Members of the local LGBTQ2S+ Mafia hosted the tour, guiding the group through the centre of Maynooth while discussing the rich queer history of the community. Councillor Nancy Matheson was notably the only member of Hastings Highlands council to participate in the walking tour.

Using a megaphone, Mitchell steered the group through the hamlet, stopping at various locations en-route to share interesting tidbits of queer history. After the tour, he recalled a story he shared with the tour group about an incident in 1976, where two gay men were arrested for kissing in public at the corner of Yonge and Bloor streets in Toronto. Noting how in response to their arrest several gay activists staged a kiss-in at the same corner, Mitchell said. "To commemorate this, several queers on the tour locked lips, celebrating queer love in our small rural community."

Pointing across the road at the municipal office, Mitchell also talked about how in 2019 Hastings Highlands council "set a really low bar" when it comes to fostering inclusion by refusing to fly the rainbow flag during Pride week. Reminiscing about how that same year Maynooth Pride drew in more than 250 people - the event's largest attendance ever - he noted how Councillor Nancy Matheson was the only member of council to vote in favour of raising the flag. Thanking her for also being the only member of council to participate in the Queer History Tour, Mitchell said he was honoured and proud to be a part of the work being done locally to create a more inclusive community.

Reverend Marilyn Zehr of the Maynooth Madawaska Pastoral Charge United Church was another of the speakers to address the Queer History Tour group that morning. Speaking as a representative of the United Church, Zehr said she is also proud to be a part of an organization that has committed to welcoming in a more diverse congregation. Acknowledging how an individual or individuals defaced the "Black Lives Matter" and "United Against Racism" signs on the church's lawn with hateful graffiti following the public murder of George Floyd she said there is still obviously a lot of work that needs to be done locally.

Sharing her account of the events leading up to the vandal's manifestation of ignorance, Zehr said, "Knowing that we have been part of oppression so long - part of causing it - when the Black Lives Matter movement began, we put up Black Lives Matter movement signs on this lawn. The church leadership decided we were going to do that, we were going to be a part of that, and they were

disfigured with a pink Star of David. I mean it couldn't have been more homophobic, racist, and anti-Semitic. It was a well-thought through disfiguration of our Black Lives Matter signs."

While the graffiti was certainly intended to inspire fear and exclusion, Zehr said she still feels "very safe in this community" despite the tension.

"It's a long journey to what inclusion means, what oppression means, and what colonialism means, but I am at least proud to be part of an institution that is working on it," she told the group.

To wrap up this year's Maynooth Pride, festivalgoers kept the good vibes flowing into Sunday, moving the celebration to the sandy shores of Papineau Lake.