

"All Together Now" -- York Pride Parade, festival offers something for everyone



By Brock Weir

There was some disappointment in the air last year when they made their way south on Newmarket's Main Street. Crowds were sparse as they left Ontario Street, heading south towards Water Street, and they questioned whether their message was lost on York Region.

But all that changed as they crested the hill and saw huge crowds and a sea of rainbows ahead.

The response removed any lingering doubts in the minds of York Pride's organizers, and as they put the finishing touches on their second annual Pride Parade this Saturday, they are looking forward to a family-friendly party that is bigger and better than ever.

The York Region Pride Parade, which was hosted by the Town of Richmond Hill before planting new roots in Newmarket last year, will begin Saturday afternoon at 3 p.m., leaving Main and Ontario Streets and heading south.

It will be followed a full afternoon and evening of activities and entertainment at Riverwalk Commons, before an after party at the adjacent Stage 185, York Region's very first LGBTQ lounge.

When we moved from Richmond Hill, we weren't too sure what it was going to be like because as much as Richmond Hill was open and supportive, there were still a lot of barriers, says York Pride's Jacob Gal of some of the bureaucratic roadblocks they faced in the municipality. If you were on the parade route last year, just before you go over the hill, it was extremely empty. People were getting the sense that they had in Richmond Hill that the streets were semi-deserted and not too many people were there watching.

The moment you crested the hill and went over, it was just chaotic rainbowness on the other side: thousands of people, different ages, young and old, lots of family. It was, one, a liberating feeling and, two, it gives you goosebumps because you got accustomed to a crowd that wasn't building.

But build it did and they are looking forward to even more of a crowd this year as they branch out into further activities and with more partners from the business community and community at large.

Stage 185 is the brainchild of Diana (Patrice) and Teresa Morrison who wanted to foster a hangout for York Region's LGBTQ community and give them a venue, a safe space that is an alternative to making the trek to similar restaurant-lounges in Downtown Toronto.

I knew of my sexuality and who I was since I was about 12, but growing up in York Region for 24 years, you always wonder yourself if there are LGBTQ, says Diana. We live in [a Region] where, unfortunately, we have to hide who we are. I can go to Richmond Hill and I see people who are visibly LGBTQ, but growing up in Aurora and Newmarket, we were all taught to hide it, whether it was at school, with family or getting work.

We all go downtown because downtown is where we are accepted, downtown is where everything is, and this is the closest thing up here.

Stage 185 had a soft launch earlier this spring and the response has been overwhelming, laying to rest any naysayers who Diana says claimed York Region just wasn't ready for the Lounge.

But, ready they are and ready they were to take in the Pride celebrations last year as well.

If you attended last year's events, this year's Pride Festival will be far more than just the parade itself.

Once the parade concludes on Main Street, Riverwalk's festival will be a three-pronged affair with representation from community organizations on resources available throughout York Region. Then, there is an 'interactive' area with henna, face painting, inflatables, rock climbing, and reptile shows, and just beyond that are the carnival eats and the main stage, which will feature everything from a 'very communal smudging ceremony' led by Indigenous advocate Kim Wheatley, to steel pan, to youth drag. The celebration will culminate in a fireworks display around 10.30 p.m. before the party continues at Stage 185.

The theme for this year's Pride Festival is 'All Together Now' and, indeed, it is a theme that serves as a driving philosophy not only for the Festival itself, but the organization as a whole.

It is one they hope is embraced by the entire community 'LGBTQ members, families, straight allies, and more' if they are returning to the Festival or taking part for the first time.

'We like to remind people that Pride is for everyone and every different type of person, for all the people in our community to coming out,' says Jacob. 'It is a great opportunity to blend in. If you're not out, you don't have to necessarily identify as queer or part of the community. You should be able to come out and experience it. Last year, our first year in Newmarket, the most asked question was, 'Is it family friendly?' A lot of people were unaware of what our celebration even looked like and we had been doing it for four years in Richmond Hill. It just comes down to people not knowing and educating them' and if you don't come out to the celebration, you can't get educated.'

For more on York Pride, visit yorkpridefest.com.

Next Week: Ms. Morrison and Mr. Gal discuss the value and importance of 'safe spaces' in York Region. For full coverage of the Pride Festival, see the June 21 edition of [The Auroran](#).