

Pride flags foster acceptance

BY ELLEN CHAMBERS

PRIDE flags never fail to fill me with pride and emotion. Often tears. With the end of another successful pride month, I reflect on what a flag can mean.

It's about young kids who can see that someone cares, that schools and the city cares about those who identify as lesbian, bi-sexual, gay, queer, two-spirit, transgender, questioning, inter-sex, asexual and plus — signifying additional identity terms.

We've learned much over the years of openly embracing Pride month. We've made changes to our speech, understanding who identifies under the 2SLGBTQIA umbrellas. The original Pride Flag, with the rainbow colours is full of meaning. The Progressive Pride Flag includes the pink, blue and white of the transgender flag, but also brown and black to include people of colour.

It's amazing how flags instill pride and even comfort. I've felt that comfort — knowing while only a flag, it can symbolize movement — movement towards acceptance, inclusion, and safety — a basic overriding right, especially for students in schools.

My comfort was from watching gender sexuality alliances (GSAs) in the schools grow, to seeing policies made and upheld giving anti-bullying, anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia protections.

Bill 13 in 2012 enshrined certain expectations and protections in legislation for all schools in Ontario. That bill changed the perspective across Ontario as did the legalizing of same-sex marriage in 2005. These important life-changing laws changed Canadians out-



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The Thunder Bay Anti-Racism and Equity Advisory Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario

look and while discrimination, hatred and bullying still existed, a sigh of relief could be felt. My sigh of relief was knowing that kids in schools would have a safer environment than what my gay son experienced 20 years ago.

Kids were safe to come out, GSAs provided safety, friendship, and leadership. Pride parades and celebrations, drag shows and drag queen story times happily are our Thunder Bay norm. At this year's Pride Festival, I saw kids draped in flags of their choice, and proud to tell me what the flags represented to them and their identity. They were proud, happy, and free to express who they truly are. What a gift this celebration and time of year can be.

And then another change crept our way. Last year a school board office was targeted, and protesters hurled vindictive words, ugly signs were held up there and at protests about a trans woman at a gym. A local elementary school endured angry people shamefully protesting trans rights where children could see and hear them. A bomb threat halted drag queen story time.

An Ipsos survey released in May, shows declining support for 2SLGBTQI rights in Canada. Ipsos vice president Sanyam Sethi said: "What really stood out to me was how starkly Canadians are changing their opinions." Canada had highest the highest drop in support across all 26 countries surveyed.

This isn't from random changing attitudes. This is because groups like Coalition for Life, Million March for Children, extensive organized protests on sexual orientation and gender identity curriculum in B.C. schools and other protests across Canada have moved the dial backwards. Conservative governments in three provinces have found that listening to pressure groups and a conservative ideology gives possible political gain. Claiming parental rights, students in those provinces are not allowed to use pronouns that identify who they are without explicit parental consent. No longer providing what was possibly their only safe place to be who they are — their school.

Pride month and the Progressive Pride flag represents acceptance, and continuing positive change, positive change in turning attitudes and behaviour.

This is the time for allies to withstand the push toward hatred and counter 'mis' and 'dis' information. Our kids' lives depend on it.

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