

A day of unity and acceptance: Celebrate Your Awesome to return to Alexandra Park

Written By Sam Odrowski

Celebrate Your Awesome's 8th Annual Pride & Diversity Event is returning to Alexandra Park in Orangeville on June 21.

The event has an earlier start and end time this year, running from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., and will feature drag shows, a story time hosted by the library, live music, a vendor's market and an atmosphere that celebrates Pride and diversity.

Celebrate Your Awesome (CYA) founder Jim Waddington noted that it's family-friendly and everyone in the community is invited to attend to celebrate the things that make them awesome.

"It doesn't matter whatever background you are, whatever nationality you are, that's secondary. The idea is that we come together as a community to celebrate Pride and to celebrate the diversity within Dufferin County," said Waddington.

Last year, organizers estimated over 5,000 people attended and this year they're hoping to see that number continue to grow.

Celebrate Your Awesome's event falls on Indigenous People's Day this year, and the Brave Canoe, a local Indigenous-led not-for-profit, will be a part of the event's opening ceremonies.

New this year is the expansion of food options, with multiple food trucks expected on June 21.

There will be a story time event held around noon, sponsored by the Orangeville Public Library.

There will be two drag shows at the event. The first one is scheduled for around 2 p.m. and the second one, later in the evening, starts at 7 p.m., both hosted by TroyBoy Entertainment.

"TroyBoy Entertainment has been with us now for eight years," said Waddington. "Troy's always brought a different variety of drag queens, and we look at the diversity as much as possible. There's often a trans person, a person of color or from a marginalized group, and it's not just a simple thing, it's something that we really have to work at and make happen."

Cherry Chapstick, a two-person band made up of Emily Gilbert and Jessie Steinberg, will be performing during the event.

In addition to a shopping area with local artisans and vendors, the event will feature a community zone, filled with not-for-profit organizations that support the LGBTQ community, sharing information and resources.

Family Transition Place, which provides support to women, children and people who identify as transgender or non-binary, will have a booth setup. Dufferin Child and Family Services, which runs the GLOW 2SLGBTQ+ Youth Group, will also be present.

Most major banks in the community are supporting the event and will have a booth.

Zehrs will also be back with a booth offering free healthy snacks, as a signature sponsor of the event.

Members of local emergency services, such as the fire department and OPP, will be in attendance as well.

An after-party event, held independently by the Rainbow Ridge Resort and Campground (203138 Dufferin County Rd 109, Grand Valley), will kick off at 9 p.m. on June 21.

Waddington noted the importance of promoting Pride and diversity, amidst growing tensions with DEI in the United States and around the world.

“With the state of the world and all this negativity and uncertainty, I think it's important that we come together and celebrate the fact that everyone here is awesome, and I think we lose sight of that sometimes,” said Waddington. “It's about everybody coming together for the common good and to be part of a society that thrives on diversity, equity and inclusion.”

He added, “Our 2SLGBTQIA+ community, of all aspects of the acronym, in many parts of the world, are threatened? The actual [U.S.] government has made it very clear that it's ‘he’ and ‘she’ and that's it.

“To come out with a phrase like that is ‘certainly to me’ quite devastating, painful, harmful, and disrespectful to just everyday people.”

In light of this, Waddington said CYA's event is that much more important this year, to invite in people with open arms and share a message of acceptance and inclusion.

“The key is letting people know they're welcome here,” he noted.

Reflecting back on CYA's humble beginnings, Waddington said, “I brought people together nine years ago at the Mill Creek Pub, and from there, we've evolved, and the committee has done fabulous work, putting things together.”

He continued, “It's not an easy task to run a festival, it costs money, so we have some we have some wonderful sponsors in the community, and a lot of people that have donated, privately to support this event.”

Waddington hopes to see continued growth with the CYA event and year-round initiatives it supports.

“Maybe one year it'll end up on Broadway or we'll be so big that that we have to move it to a new location to make it sustainable for everyone,” said Waddington.

Looking at year-round resources for people who identify as LGBTQ, there is the Queer Village reading club, which runs out of the Orangeville Public Library. There's also a Queer Village Book Club ran out of the Caledon Library's Alton Branch.

CYA runs Rainbow Connection, which was started by Waddington and Jessie Steinberg in December. It has run a few events, such as a games night featuring bingo or a ukulele workshop, ran by the local Ukuladies group.

“Her and I were trying to increase the awareness of people in the queer community and allowing them an opportunity to network together, so its people who are online looking for places to go or a business in town that would like to be part of the gay community,” said Waddington. “We try to reach out as much as possible and put it out in social media that this is a meeting space as a Rainbow Connection.”

The group runs monthly and sees new people at each event, according to Waddington.

Follow the “2SLGBTQIA+ PRIDE ORANGEVILLE & DUFFERIN COUNTY” Facebook Page for updates.