

Flag supports student solidarity



Right, St. Paul's United Church Rev. Lynn Watson presents North Hastings High School Alphabet Club member Alex Jones with a rainbow flag that was signed by community members in support of diversity over the summer. Jones was among the first to sign. / SARAH SOBANSKI Staff

By Sarah Sobanski

The rainbow flag that's been floating around the community has found its permanent home at North Hastings High School with the Alphabet Club.

The flag has been circulating the community for people to sign in support of diversity. It was sewn after the 2016 Orlando shooting. "This hung for two weeks on the steps of St. Paul's United Church," said church Rev. Lynn Watson. "I thought, 'Oh what a neat idea, to have folks sign it, who consider themselves allies of the LGBT community and all the other alphabets that come after that.'" The call for people to sign the flag went out in June. The first to sign it was club member Alex Jones. It later was stationed at County Camera Photography in Bancroft.

"People would come in, they'd see the flag, they'd see the markers, and they'd ask, 'What's this for?'" said Watson, explaining that she'd heard some people came into the store and stormed out after learning of the idea. "So [store owner Lesley McCormack] quickly went and got a rainbow flag and slapped it on the window."

She added, "She was just blown away, as was I, by the number of signatures."

Watson presented the signed flag, now without room for more signatures, to the club Oct. 19. The club are looking for a large flag

pole for sale so that it can be hung in front of the high school, but for now they plan to hang it in the high school's lunchroom. Bancroft Councillor Bill Kilpatrick, who attended the hand-over with other community members, was moved by what the students had accomplished.

Kilpatrick, a regular speaker at the school, told a story of arriving one day to find students with rainbow painted on their faces and wearing rainbow flags.

"Don't mistake these tears for sadness, these are tears of joy," Kilpatrick told students, visibly moved by the story.

"I had to ask, 'What's going on?'... And they said, 'Well, there were some kids that were being bullied and harassed,'" he said. "A lot of the other kids stepped up to wear the flag and to put the flag on their face. That is so awesome, because it's about solidarity." He added, "We're all in this fight together, all of us. It doesn't matter who we are, whether you're disabled, a person of colour, female - it's different differences but the same fights."

The club chose the name Alphabet Club because it felt LGBTQ didn't encompass everyone they wanted to stand up for, explained clubroom host and Grade 10 teacher Chip Gillis.

Metis Nation of Ontario's Marsha Deportier explained that LGBTQ members of the community are called two-spirited in Indigenous heritage.

"We've never asked our individuals to identify," explained Deportier. "You be who you are. When you walk as a two-spirited person, you are that much closer to creator and that much closer to creation."

Gillis said it meant a lot to the students knowing that so many community members stood with them.

"Particularly in a rural community, sometimes it's difficult," said Gillis. "The kids that come are fantastic. It's a small portion of kids that are identified, self-identified or still questioning in the building. Hopefully things like this will give them a little bit more strength and a little more opportunity to be who they are."

"We're with you when you struggle, and we're with you when you're celebrating who you are," said Watson.