

?Take Pride? spirit day promotes acceptance, reduces stigma and helps students feel safe



By Bill Kilpatrick

On June 9 North Hastings High School held its first ever gay pride themed spirit say entitled ?Take Pride.? The event was organized by students in the Increasing Awareness Erasing Stigma Club, with the help of educator Jenny Burbidge, public health nurse Sabrina Webster and a \$5,000 grant from Participaction. The purpose of the event was to encourage students to ?Take Pride? in who they are, but other sub-themes revolved around increasing awareness about the decline in mental health of all teenagers and the importance of physical activity and its connection to mental health. This event, however, focused specifically on LGBTQ+ teens, who, due to the stigma that still exists, are especially vulnerable to mental health issues, substance abuse, self-harm, and suicide.

The Take Pride event was the culminating activity in a year-long campaign by members of the club who have been partaking in activities all year long designed to raise awareness and reduce the stigma of mental health issues. Burbidge said that the club was formed back in the fall in partnership with Hastings and Prince Edward Public Health and the idea was to form a committee that would help address student issues within the school. First, Burbidge explained, there needed to be an action plan created by the committee that was submitted to public health and then, if approved, the group would receive funding to implement the initiatives outlined in the action plan. The group that was formed in the fall, which consisted of seven students that were supervised by Burbidge and Webster, was entirely youth driven. When the youth were asked what issue they would like to address, the group unanimously decided that mental health was the number one issue that needed to be tackled. They then decided on the name ?Increasing Awareness Erasing Stigma Club.? Their action plan was approved by Public Health in the fall and the group was one of

the schools who received \$1,000 to help them implement their plan.

As Webster explained, the group was very creative in terms of the different initiatives they carried out each month with the goal of helping to increase the mental well-being of their fellow students. For example the club brought in therapy dogs for mental health week at the beginning of May, they held a 'gratitude day' that included a food drive and a pizza party for the class that was able to get the most donations, they ran self-care challenges that involved activities that would increase students mental health and then asked the students to take a selfie of them doing the activity such as reading a book, hugging your pet, being kind to a friend, or having a nap, just to name a few. On one morning the club came to school early and placed post-it notes on every student's locker that had inspiring kind messages on them. In one particularly powerful initiative that was meant to demonstrate the power of kindness, students, with the permission of their peers, took a picture of them; they then said something kind about that person that highlighted something that was unique to them, and then they took a picture immediately after words capturing the impact of that kindness. Webster said that it caused many people who participated or even witnessed the pictures to tear up.

Through the Participaction grant the Take Pride event was able to combine activities that focused on physical health, mental health, and inclusiveness. This included bubble soccer, courtesy of Toronto Bubble Soccer, badminton, volleyball, Indigenous crafts, yoga, dancing, slime making, art, and most importantly the day provided a space where all students could be themselves in a safe and welcoming environment. Ava Lahey, an LGBTQ+ student, said that she has never seen people in the halls look this happy. 'People are walking around with pride flags, face paint, dressed colourfully. They feel happy and they actually feel safe in the school. I've never seen kids feel so safe as they are today.'

Speaking with three of the members of the Increasing Awareness Erasing Stigma club, Kyla Hickey, Clara Vance and Kyra Grant, along with Ava Lahey, who outlined clearly why they felt that a pride themed event was important for them. During the assembly that kicked off the day the club showed a slide show where they cited statistics from the Canadian Association of Mental Health that pointed out that two in five teenagers suffer from depression and anxiety adding that 39 per cent of high school students indicate having moderate-to-severe levels of psychological distress, adding that this number increases dramatically among members of the LGBTQ+ community. The students spoke about the day-to-day issues that impact them as either members of the LGBTQ+ community or their allies. They cited the use of hateful words used to put others down, belittle other students, and isolate members of the LGBTQ+ community. Hickey spoke about the divide between the popular kids and those who do not belong to that community and how if you appear different, 'you're getting picked on.' As an ally she has felt the psychological distress that results from being treated differently as though you are not a member of the school community simply because you are an ally to a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

Lahey admitted that she was scared about showing up to the pride day wearing anything that showed she was part of the LGBTQ+ community because she didn't know what it was going to be like. Students have a very real fear of accessing so-called safe places for fear of being 'outed' and the bullying that results and it appears to be getting worse not better. The students spoke about seeing a marked increase in the number of videos being posted to social media showing people taking down pride flags, burning them or running them over. A May 2023 CTV article cited the recent increase in hate crimes and violence towards members of the LGBTQ+ community, along with the ongoing Bud Light controversy involving the transsexual social influencer Dylan Mulvaney and the recent vandalism of a pride flag at Sir Frederick Banting High School in London, Ontario, just to name a few recent incidents. Webster explains why the pride theme is so important and how it is tied directly to mental health issues, stating that 'Statistically LGBTQ+ students face really significant challenges to their mental health due to stigma and feeling that they are not accepted and included. They have higher rates of suicide, mental health, self-harm and are less likely to seek treatment.' Lahey spoke about how she has been excluded from social events because of who she is adding, 'You try to put on a strong face, but the constant barrage of homophobic slurs like 'gay' and 'faggot' take their toll. I just wish they could put themselves in our shoes and realize how that affects a person's self-esteem, self-image, and self-worth. It really messes you up.'

Leading up to the pride themed event the students stated that they experienced increasing hostile questions like, 'Why do you have to bring sexuality into everything? Why can't we just have a mental health day? Why isn't there a straight day?' Vance pointed out that if LGBTQ+ people were allowed to exist without discrimination there would be no need to have a special day. Vance spoke about a recent incident where a teacher was asked why a gay pride flag was flying in their classroom and not the Canadian flag, to

which the teacher responded because no one at the high school gets discriminated against because they identify as a Canadian. The questions have taken a ridiculous turn, as Vance pointed out citing someone who asked her why the gays get a whole month to celebrate but the veterans do not. Questions like these do not appear to be asked out of genuine curiosity or inquiry, but instead appear to be an attempt to challenge the validity of the need for pride celebrations at all, despite the growing statistics of increasing hate and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people. Lahey points out that there are just some people who 'don't want to see it [pride symbols]; they don't want to know about it and they don't want to hear about it. They want it eradicated from the public entirely.' The same people 'tell us to be what you want, but don't shove it down our throat.' Lahey adds that comments like those are 'not being supportive because if I can't be myself but you can, how is that fair?'

Explaining the meaning of Pride, Burbidge points out, 'We need to be welcoming and accepting to every single person in this school no matter your gender, culture, or religion.' This was a sentiment shared by Webster who said, 'What we really want is to have students feel safe at school regardless of sexual orientation, gender, or race,' but not just on pride day, everyday. When Lahey arrived at school the morning of the 'Take Pride' spirit day some of her fears were put to rest as she recounts, 'This morning when I got off my bus I saw two girls wrapped up in a pride flag wearing their pride shirts and I started crying because I knew that would never ever in a million years happen on any other day. So if we can have one day where they [homophobic people] feel uncomfortable so we can feel comfortable, then so be it.' According to Webster the success of the first pride themed spirit day belongs to the efforts of the students who conceived it, organized it and made it a reality, adding that 'The parents of these kids have a lot to be proud of. It's inspiring. These kids inspire me everyday with what they are able to accomplish. What they're doing is pretty amazing. They've inspired everybody to get behind them' and 'We stand behind the LGBTQ+ community and those students as well.'