



Committee of the Whole

Meeting Date: May 9, 2023
Submitted by: Lindsay Brock, Director of Library Services
Subject: Middlesex County Library Drag Storytime Programs

BACKGROUND:

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with information on planned Drag Storytime programs at Middlesex County Library branches. Drag Storytime programs are scheduled to run at three Library branches this spring/summer, in partnership with the Rainbow Optimist Club of Southwestern Ontario and Strathroy Pride.

ANALYSIS:

Drag (or Drag Queen) Storytime is a public library program that features drag performers reading stories to children and families. A Drag Storytime takes traditional elements of performance for children – such as storytelling, costumes, and songs – and adds to that an opportunity to promote diversity and inclusion by featuring Drag performers in spectacular attire. Many libraries, as well as community groups and other agencies, have found Drag Storytimes to be a successful way to entertain while also helping broaden participants understanding of diversity.

Middlesex County Library first offered a Drag Storytime program at the Coldstream Branch in July 2017. Library staff connected with Pride London to arrange the program, and the program featured a local drag performance artist.

In December 2018, Library staff began a partnership with the Rainbow Optimist Club of Southwestern Ontario. The mandate of the Rainbow Optimist Club is “Bettering the lives of LGBT2Q+ rural youth, their families, and their communities in Elgin, Middlesex, and Oxford Counties.” For Middlesex County Library, the goal of this partnership was to create programming geared towards inclusivity and positioning libraries in Middlesex County as safe spaces for LGBT2Q+ patrons.

The Rainbow Optimist Club provided the Library with the following information related to the need for LGBT2Q+ programming in our communities:

- LGBT2Q+ youth face approximately 14 times the risk of suicide than heterosexual peers – this number is higher in rural areas;

- Racism, religious intolerance, homophobia and gender based violence are still evident in our communities;
- Rejection, exclusion and estrangement are associated with behavioural problems in youth.

The Rainbow Optimist Club currently also partners with other library systems in the area. Middlesex County Library, Elgin County Library and St. Thomas Public Library have been involved since 2018, with Oxford County Library and Woodstock Public Library joining as the project evolved. The Rainbow Optimist Club has also ran programs with storytellers in Huron, Lambton and Perth County. Between May 2019 and January 2020, over 1,000 children, parents and caregivers attended storytimes through the Rainbow Optimist Club partnership.

In 2020, when pandemic restrictions limited the ability to hold in-person programs, the Rainbow Optimist Club launched their Virtual Drag Storytime project. Rainbow Optimist filmed their performers singing songs and reading stories, and Middlesex, Oxford and Elgin County Library systems promoted the series through their social media platforms. These recordings can be accessed through the Rainbow Optimist website, and new virtual storytimes continue to be promoted once a month. The Rainbow Optimist Club receives funding from TD Bank, and this is what supports the execution of their virtual and in-person programs – there is no cost to participating libraries.

Since 2017, Middlesex County Library has hosted five in-person Drag Storytime programs in the communities of Coldstream, Dorchester, Glencoe, Parkhill and Strathroy. In-person programs resumed in July 2022, with a Drag Storytime at the Dorchester Library – this was a collaboration with the Municipality of Thames Centre and their Pride Festival. Participants of all ages attended these programs, expressing their enjoyment and appreciation for the opportunity to attend.

At the time of the 2019 programs, a small number of letters and emails of concern were received and reviewed by staff and the Library Board. While planning the current schedule of programs, library staff were provided with talking points and instructions for handling questions or concerns about Drag Storytimes – emails and phone messages are transferred to management to resolve, ensuring that the Library's messaging is consistent and appropriate.

In 2023, three Drag Storytime programs are scheduled: Parkhill Library (April 29), Komoka Library (May 27), and Strathroy Library (June 24). These events will be held in the program rooms at the three locations.

Middlesex County Library is committed to providing a supportive and inclusive environment where all are welcome. Library programs support the Library Board's strategic plan objectives, including:

- *We will further develop our services and programs to be inclusive, accessible and welcoming to all members of our communities."*

Middlesex County Library subscribes to the Ontario Library and Information Technology Association (OLITA) Position Statement – Inclusiveness in Public Library Programming (November 27, 2015): “OLITA supports and encourages public library programming that welcomes all individuals, regardless of heritage, education, beliefs, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical or mental capabilities, or income.”

For Middlesex County Library, the Drag Storytime partnership with the Rainbow Optimist Club and Strathroy Pride is an important step towards making library branches LGBT2Q+ friendly spaces. Library staff have also participated in the Rainbow Optimist workshop *Creating Safer Spaces*, which supports staff to create workspaces that are more positive/safer, where staff understand LGBT2Q+ issues and needs, and also understand the challenges and stigma faced by the LGBT2Q+ community and their families. This training supports the planning and execution of the Drag Storytime programs.

Drag Storytime programs show children and families that the library is a safe space where they can be themselves. These programs feature messages of friendship, kindness and acceptance. Early childhood theory recognizes that encouraging and supporting a child’s understanding of belonging and identity is fundamental to their development. Exploring diversity, and celebrating differences and being unique is an important element of this journey, and Middlesex County Library is committed to supporting this work.

ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC FOCUS:

Strategic Focus	Goals	Objectives
Cultivating Community Vitality	Advance a diverse, healthy, and engaged community across Middlesex County.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Promote and support community wellness.

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT the Middlesex County Library Drag Storytime Programs report be received for information.