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Bolton resident starts community?s very first LGBTQ2S+ advocacy group

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Not everyone has a ?coming out? story.

Julia Bertola moved to Bolton for high school. Her class was the first wave of students to attend St. Michael Catholic Secondary School.

?I have no coming out story, like when people ask me ?when did you know,' I cannot give them the exact date,? Julia explained. ?There was no ?Oh I knew I was gay on August 2013 and 6 p.m.' I just sort of knew in my bones.?

During high school, Julia was never exposed to a LGBTQ2S+ community at St. Michaels ? because there wasn't one.

People were not outspokenly against homosexuals; it was just never a topic of conversation. She remembers having her guesses but no one ever said, ?I am gay,? she recalled.

It was a known, but unspoken topic during her high school years.

?I knew pretty much all throughout high school, but I looked around in Grade 9 at the people surrounding me at school and I just thought this was not the best place to find my soul,? said Julia.

After high school, Julia went to Sheridan College for film at the Oakville campus. It was in college when Julia decided to tell people she was gay.

A lot of people already knew, she said. And when she came out, she consistently received the response ?We knew, but we wanted you to come out on your own.?

When Julia came back to Bolton this spring, she got a 10-month contract with Caledon Community Services (CCS) as their communications intern.

Julia started doing her research and found out that the Region of Peel celebrates Pride in July. She had no idea and still didn't know any safe places for the Caledon LGBTQ2S+ community to gather.

After her years advocating for her community at Sheridan, she felt she needed to do something similar here in Bolton.

On July 21 Julia started a Facebook page to introduce her advocacy group to the Caledon community in the best way she knew how ? social media.

The group is called ?Caledon Pride,? and Julia is currently the only member, in partnership with CCS and the Caledon Exchange program, who offered her space to hold any events and meetings.

?I'm so happy to welcome you to Caledon's new social club, Caledon PRIDE! In partnership with Caledon Community Services, Caledon Pride is a peer-led group dedicated to creating an environment in the Caledon community where LGBT2SQ+ identified people can thrive,? wrote Julia. ?The group will organize social and educational events, provide resources on gender and sexuality and host regular social gatherings open to all.?

Julia got this idea for an advocacy group, while starting at CCS and noticing the lack in services specialized for the LGBTQ2S+ Individuals.

For the first meeting, the group will meet at the Exchange on August 31 from 2 to 3 p.m. and anyone interested in joining the group are welcome, including LGBTQ2S+ allies.

?This is long overdue, we are excited to work closely with Julia and create a safe and welcoming group,? said Monty Laskin, CEO OF CCS. ?Caledon knows how to champion its residents, we're eager to create a group that allows our community to embrace Caledon Pride.?

Julia said, she herself still has questions. She wants to hopefully grow this advocacy group over the years in Caledon and hopes she can work with youth educators to help educate the community further on the LGBTQ2S+ community.

Julia never blamed anyone during high school years for being homophobic; she doesn't even blame the school. She mainly just felt students weren't exposed or educated on the issue, and therefore, she didn't feel comfortable coming out until she was exposed to people openly being themselves with confidence, something she never experienced in Bolton.

Mayor Allan Thompson has been very supportive of new initiatives to promote inclusivity in the community.

?I fully support initiatives that promote inclusion, like the rainbow walkway for Peel Pride.? Said Mayor Thompson. ?I think our town hall campus grounds are the perfect space to demonstrates our Town wide support of this program.?

As of July 11 regional council voted in favour for a $25, 000 provision to paint rainbow crosswalks in the Region of Peel.

?I have not had a single negative thing said to me. I was ready to fight people because I still have that part of me where I feel I need to defend who I am, but that didn't happen. The community has been really supportive ,? said Julia.