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LLLC Drag Queen Storytime simultaneously celebrated & protested

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Photo Sharon K. Sobotta

Fifteen-year-old "Laurie" stood in the middle of two groups of demonstrators - one side with rainbow colors and signs with messages like "drag queens are fabulous" and "love is louder," and the other with signs saying "stop grooming and sexualizing kids" - after partaking in the Sept. 19 storytime with Bella Aldama at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center.

"I'm not out as transgender," Laurie said, after asking that we conceal her identity for her safety in this community. "I use all pronouns and I would just say that I am me. I was so excited to see that there was a drag queen storytime at the library. I think representation is so important and this makes me feel seen."

Laurie said she tried talking with one of the demonstrators protesting the event to learn more about why they believed that people like her didn't have a place in the library. "She didn't really seem very present in our conversation. She was looking at her phone and

didn't really have any answers that made sense to me," Laurie said. "I think if you're sexualizing someone reading books who is dressed in a costume and wearing makeup, I don't know what to say to you."

Laurie added that she's encountered a great deal of transphobia in the Lamorinda community and even in her own family, which makes it hard for her to fully be herself or to know that she truly belongs. Laurie is not an anomaly. It's in part, this kind of social pushback that the National Library of Medicine attributes to the fact that 82% of trans youth have considered suicide and 40% have attempted it.

Inside the library, Bella Aldama kept a crowd of children and parents entertained and engaged with her animated storytelling and singing of Selena songs. The timing of Aldama's appearance also coincided with Latinx Heritage Month, which gave space for children and families to grapple with intersectional identities. When Aldama wrapped up her storytime hour, families lined up to greet and take pictures with her. "I think it's very important to be here and show representation for different people that are out there in the world," Aldama said. "Whether it's gender expression or gender fluidity, I think we should all have someone that's an example not to follow, but to inspire us to be ourselves."

Robbie and Katie Peacock attended the event with their two children. "It was important for us to come here with our kids to show them that everyone may be different on the outside but really we're all the same people," Robbie Peacock said, while waiting in line to meet Aldama after her show. Peacock said he rejects the narrative that protesters holding signs saying that they were opposing the event in the spirit of protecting kids. "(I would tell them) to go away and read a book. That's the same thing I'd say to the people saying things online (on platforms like the Facebook Lamorinda Community group). Look how long it took for people to be somewhat OK with people who are gay and now you see the fight that people of the trans community have to fight. It's an uphill battle. People say they're open minded, but they're really not (when it comes to these issues)."

Of the eight people holding signs of opposition outside the library, only one, Dorothy Castel of Pleasant Hill, was willing to talk on the record. "When I heard that the library was sponsoring this event for children and preschoolers, I thought to myself `what parent is bringing themselves to an event with a drag queen, which is all about sexualizing,'" Castel said. "If adults want to engage in this kind of behavior, that's their personal right, but to put it on children is wrong. This is all about a greater LGBT agenda."

Justine Parmelee didn't bring any children to the event, but instead said she attended it as a sign of support for kids in the community. "I came here to support kids' learning about diverse viewpoints and really enjoying storytime," said Parmelee, who added that the protesters of the event were in part inspired by a call to action on social media from a candidate for the county board of education. Lisa Disbrow asked that folks bring a sign to message opposition to adult sexualization of schools and libraries, Parmelee said, while reading the announcement from her phone. "This was a call to action for folks to come out and protest a drag queen offering a storyhour - for part of Latinx Heritage Month - against our children who may be gay, nonbinary or trans. This group came out and protested against kids attending a storytelling event with their parents."

Allegra Porter is a librarian at the Lafayette Library, who helped plan the event. "I was thrilled because we were celebrating reading through the glamorous art of drag tonight. It was about representation and introducing kids to someone they might not have met before. We're also hoping that kids who don't see themselves represented at the library, saw themselves tonight in Bella's storytime and performance."

In response to the critics who said the event had no place at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center and to those who said they'll consider boycotting the library as a result of this event, Porter's message was simple. "I hope they change their minds. The library is for everyone."

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