

COMMUNITY —

Becoming a better ally to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community year round

By Veronica Reiner

Although Pride Month of June is over, there are many ways to be an ally to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community year-round.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2022, the country is home to at least one million people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or of another sexual orientation than heterosexual - representing four per cent of the population aged 15 years and older. Among this population, about 52 per cent are women, 44 per cent are men, and three per cent identify as non-binary.

The Wilmot-Tavistock Gazette spoke with representatives from two organizations aimed at creating safe spaces for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in Waterloo Region, including OK2BME and SPECTRUM. Both stressed the importance of meaningful action.

"It's not necessarily something that we can just call ourselves and decide that we're an ally," said Erin Huston, Program Lead at OK2BEME. "Allyship is very much something that is done and realized through ongoing action and willingness to show up in different ways."

"Someone does not just give themselves the title of ally - it's bestowed on them by people from the community that they're wanting to ally with. And that's true of any other equity seeking or marginalized community too," said Scott Williams, executive director of SPECTRUM.

"You might want to refer to yourself as an ally, but until you've actually taken action, and a queer person has recognized it and thanked you for it, that's when the allyship has actually taken place. And it needs to be ongoing."

Scott said that education is the first thing that he recommends to people wishing to become allies to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. "To spend some time educating yourself, learning about the issues that are 2SLGBTQIA+ people, and what kind of supports they might need."

On the organization's website at www.ourspectrum.com, there are different documents, toolkits, videos, and fact sheets to help better understand the current situation.

Some other actionable suggestions include writing to local representatives to support legislation for trans safety, attending fundraising events, or making donations to 2SLGBTQIA+ organizations.

Other actions could include paying attention to decisions being made in local spaces, such as the Waterloo Region District School Board. If there is something that can be done, such as writing a letter of support for inclusive



The rainbow flag, a symbol of LGBT pride and LGBT social movements. (Photo credit: Sara Rampazzo)

practices, it's important to do so.

"We often see, during Pride month, sort of a rainbow washing of corporate logos," explained Scott. "I would say that's great for visibility, which is a first step - but we'd like to know, what's backing that up? What are you doing internally in your organization for your 2SLGBTQIA+ employees, to make sure that they're represented properly in policies and procedures in your space?"

Scott suggested amplifying queer voices, and standing up for members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community when they are not in the room.

Erin suggested using gender neutral language, which is language that avoids reference toward a particular sex or gender. For example, the words "policeman" and "waitress" are gender specific job titles; the corresponding gender neutral terms are "police officer" and "server."

She added that sharing your pronouns is a great practice

to get into.

"My pronouns are she/her, no one has ever used the wrong pronouns for me, people assume she/her and they are correct," said Erin. "When I share my pronouns, it's not for my own purposes, it's so that the other person who will be introducing themselves - it's not weird for them to say that their pronouns are they/them."

Other important actions to take could include correcting people when they use incorrect pronouns, or when they use defamatory or offensive terms.

"Just being willing to have those sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes awkward conversations in our personal relationships is a really huge thing," said Erin. "It's one thing for an organization like us to come in and do training somewhere, but it's a whole different thing for someone in their immediate circle to be inviting them to maybe think in a different way."

Both organizations started years ago, and have grown over this time.

SPECTRUM is about 10 years old, and was started because of the need for physical space for 2SLGBTQIA+ in the Waterloo Region. All of their programs and services developed over time after that - there are more than 30 different groups and programs happening every month.

"We also do a lot of education through our Rainbow Diversity Training program for different businesses and organizations," said Scott. "So that's 2SLGBTQIA+ cultural competency training. We have workshops that go from the 101 level that has the basic terminology and key concepts, to 301 that gets into history, patriarchy, colonization and some more in depth topics."

OK2BME is a set of supportive services for 2SLGBTQIA+ children, teens, adults and their families in Waterloo Region. The program consists of three areas, including confidential counselling services, OK2BME youth groups for individuals ages 12 to 18, as well as public education, consulting and training around 2SLGBTQIA+ issues.

"Counselling is a huge piece of what we do," said Erin. "That is available virtually, in person. On Thursday evenings, we have our walk-in. So you don't have to necessarily need to make an appointment, you can come into the space and just request a counsellor, and one will be made available for you."

OK2BME program was officially started in 2005. "It's very much grown and continues to evolve in whatever ways people need us," said Erin.

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