



## July 17<sup>th</sup> Op-Ed - Whats Up Muskoka newspaper

### Proudly Muskokan

by Lennox LePage

As I return to daily life after enjoying an amazing World Pride celebration in Toronto I'm reminded of how open, accepting and supportive many people can be to the struggles that face the LGBT community.

I have spent my whole life living in Muskoka. There was no Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) in my high school. Sexuality and gender weren't topics that my family ever spoke of nor were they part of the 'health class' curriculum. The concept of homosexuality didn't enter my universe until my late teen years.

I came out as transgender four years ago and I learned how difficult things can be in smaller communities. Many LGBT youth end up leaving the area, usually to Toronto, in search of more accessible and knowledgeable services.

No one ever turned me away even though they were mostly ill-equipped to provide any real support. The most challenging barrier was simply that no one knew what to do with me.

Imagine walking into your Doctor's office with the flu and being told by the physician that they cannot treat you because they've never treated a flu patient before.

Awareness and knowledge of LGBT issues is the first step in being able to provide a safe and inclusive community - especially for those who experience gender differently than others expect. Unfortunately these needs are still poorly understood, especially in smaller communities such as Muskoka.

43 per cent of trans people attempt suicide. An Ontario study in 2012 identified lack of support and acceptance as the main reason.

25 - 40% of homeless youth in Toronto identify as LGBT. Many LGBT youth still end up forced to leave home.

Healthcare workers, mental health professions, social service providers and even local business people can all benefit from increased awareness. Organizations in Muskoka are beginning to realize how many clients they serve who are LGBT and how important it is to be aware of their specific needs to provide the best service.

Often it is the small steps that offer the most accommodation. Gender neutral public washrooms can make a big difference with very little effort. Let go of assumptions around gender and sexuality in conversation. Use gender neutral terms such as partner or parent.

I currently sit on the board for Muskoka Pride Community offering my experiences and knowledge to build awareness of the transgender and LGBT community. I feel honoured to have been invited to speak to several groups and teach how we can better serve our community and prepare our families and children for situations they will face throughout their lives.

My goal is to provide information so that others can contribute to the safety and support I have found in Muskoka.

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Lennox has been a member of the Muskoka Pride Community board of directors for the last 2 years. He is a proud parent to 3 children, and works to educate Muskoka about LGBT families.

Muskoka Pride Week runs from July 18 to 27, ending with the 6<sup>th</sup> annual Picnic in Annie Williams Park in Bracebridge on July 27<sup>th</sup>. Go to [www.muskokapride.com](http://www.muskokapride.com) or our Facebook Page [www.facebook.com/muskokapride](https://www.facebook.com/muskokapride) for a full schedule of events. Happy Pride!

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