



**DOWNERS GROVE
PUBLIC LIBRARY**

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August 29, 2022

To our Downers Grove Community,

The library has received a tremendous amount of feedback about the library's Drag Queen Bingo program, featuring Aurora Divine. We appreciate all thoughtful feedback and curious questions. Here, we will respond to the community's feedback at large, clarify questions around the event, and identify misconceptions that are being spread throughout various outlets.

Above all, the Downers Grove Public Library strives to serve all of the Downers Grove community, which includes many different groups of people and interests. Our goal is to provide a safe and accepting environment for everyone in our community, no matter their age, religion, political party, or identity. Diverse programs, such as Drag Queen Bingo, help everyone see people who are different being accepted and celebrated. We understand that this program might not be for everyone—just as all programs, books, services, and other materials from the library will have different audiences. This is why we strive to have a robust event schedule, collection, and variety of services. We understand that not all topics will appeal to everyone, and may even be controversial to some, however we want all members of our community to see themselves respected and reflected in the library's collection, in our programs, and by our staff.

Though we know not everything will be a perfect fit for everyone, we hope that everyone can find things that they enjoy at the library. We think of our library as a 'choose your own adventure' experience. Patrons can decide how they utilize services, and when to participate. If one of our services is not of interest to you, we are confident you will find something else that fits your needs.

One of the falsely named concerns that has been shared with us is that hosting this performance will "groom" children. This has been used largely in two different ways: that we are grooming children to be complacent around sexual predators, and/or that we are exposing children to a "contagion" that will spread and "turn them" into something they are not (i.e. gay, trans, etc.). This is indisputably false. A second concern repeatedly voiced to us is that we are purposefully introducing sexual content to children. This is also completely untrue. This performance will not be sexual in nature.

First and foremost, drag is a celebration of self-identity and self-expression. A typical drag show features a performer dressed in costume, often times singing or dancing. Many drag performances are not sexual in any way. A drag show is not the equivalent of a strip or burlesque show. Performers craft their show to fit their intended audience and venue. Their performance for adults at a bar will not be the same as their performance for teens at a library. Performers are everyday people

who enjoy dressing up and entertaining people. To use a blanket label for drag queens as pedophiles and groomers perpetuates harmful false narratives and demonstrates a lack of understanding surrounding the drag community.

Secondly, based on the research that we have available to us, children are aware of gender as a concept by the age of two, and by age three are beginning to understand and form their own identity. Teens grades 7-12 have established their own sense of self, or are exploring what their sense of self is. Through providing opportunities for teens to see their own identities, and identities of others, the library is providing opportunities for teens to recognize that difference is okay and celebrated—and to see it by example.

There have been many questions specifically around what the library's event will look like. This is primarily a bingo event, where teens will come together to win fun prizes (Squishmallows, gift cards to Target/Amazon/Downtown Dollars) in a standard game of bingo, with drag queen Aurora Divine calling numbers. Aurora will be dressed in library-appropriate drag. In a brief 15 minute break, Aurora will perform a song.

It was brought to our attention by a few members of the public that there are concerns about Aurora Divine's personal and professional social media accounts and websites. Just as all of our presenters consider the audience at hand, Aurora's performance will be age-appropriate and has been discussed at length with our librarians who are specially trained and educated to work with teens. We understand that Aurora has posted content that is intended for adult consumption on her personal websites, and that adults in our community were concerned about children having access to adult content if they were to search for Aurora online. We do not market or promote performer's social media, website, content or merchandise to patrons. We also understand that, as a public institution, we might hire individuals who hold beliefs or values contrary to members of staff or the public, but that they have a right to voice their opinions on their personal or professional accounts. This is a protected First Amendment right.

We understand that this topic will be controversial to some, however we must recognize that not including them also causes harm. We want everyone in our community to see the library and know they are represented and cared for here. We have received requests from local tax-paying patrons and community partners who would like to continue to see programs similar to Drag Queen Bingo. Research shows that seeing positive representations of oneself, in regards to race, religion, gender, sexuality, etcetera, helps children feel more positively about themselves. The second highest cause of death for teens is suicide. When looking at teens in the LGBTQIA+ community, these numbers dramatically increase. Programs like Drag Queen Bingo help all teens see people who are different being accepted.

The library has received an abundance of positive feedback, from lifelong residents, new community members, local neighbors, and community leaders alike. Patrons have thanked us for providing this opportunity for teens to see their own identities or identities different than their own celebrated and respected. We understand that not everyone likes the programs we host. As always we welcome the public to share input and ideas about this and other programs. We appreciate feedback and value the opinions of all.

To help clarify further questions, we have created an FAQ, found at the bottom of this letter. Thank you for your time and open-minded consideration.

Sincerely,

Julie Milavec, Library Director
and the Downers Grove Public Library Staff

FAQ:

What is this program going to be?

There will be several rounds of bingo games and a short, age-appropriate lip sync performance of the song Firework by Katy Perry.

Why are you having this program?

It will be a lot of fun! We wanted to host this event in celebration of National Coming Out Day, which is October 11. As mentioned previously, we want to make sure patrons can see themselves reflected in our collections and events. As expressed by many LGBTQIA+ community members who have expressed interest in programming like Drag Queen Bingo, there is not a lot of representation of LGBTQIA+ identities in programming made available to teens in Downers Grove. Programs like this help everyone see people who are different being accepted and celebrated. This program emphasizes acceptance, inclusion, empathy, and being who you are. We wanted to create a safe environment where LGBTQIA+ teens could see that difference is celebrated first-hand, and where other community members can see that Drag Queens are everyday people. Additionally, since we are a library, we knew that providing an opportunity for teens to see a drag show without having to go into the city or to a bar would be valuable: we're making the experience accessible while also making sure it's an age appropriate performance. Our goal is to provide a safe and accepting environment for everyone in our community. The teens will be in a safe and affirming place.

Outside of the matter of representation: we wanted to create a fun event for teens where they can come hang out at the library while winning prizes. Trivia can be intimidating for some, whereas bingo is universally loved and there are no barriers that come with not knowing the answers to a tricky trivia question!

Who can attend?

This program is open to teens grades 7th-12th (ages 12-18). Registration is required. It is up to the parent to decide whether they feel this is a program they want their teen to attend or not. Due to overwhelming response at this time the program is full, but the waitlist is open.

What does it mean to be a drag queen?

A drag queen is a person, usually male, who dresses in clothing of the opposite sex and often acts with exaggerated femininity and in feminine gender roles for the purpose of entertainment or fashion. Drag can be a creative outlet, a means of self-exploration, and a way to make cultural statements.

Isn't this an inappropriate adult program for teens?

Just as all of our presenters consider the audience at hand, Aurora's performance will be age-appropriate and has been discussed at length with our librarians who are specially trained and educated to work with teens. A typical drag show features a performer dressed in costume, often times singing or dancing. Many drag performances are not sexual in any way. A drag

FAQ Continued:

What is Aurora Divine's background?

Bio provided by the presenter:

I grew up in a small town in the middle of the corn field of Illinois. Where, if you were not riding a tractor or a driving a pick up truck you were different. Through the years I became involved with performance theatre, volunteering at our local community theater or at the high school. There, I learned that I have a craft for makeup, costumes, hair and performing. While continuing my career in theatre I had found a new and interesting outlet of performance, which was, the art of drag. I found that drag performers wore extravagant costumes, wild and big hair, they commanded an audience, and that is exactly what I wanted to do. I started my adventures in drag in the same small town I grew up in, and there were challenging people along the way. I never forgot what my mother used to say, "be who you are, and be great at it." After a few years I moved to Chicago to expand my reach of new and exciting opportunities. I very quickly realized that there were a lot more performers than just drag queens doing what I do. There are drag kings, AFAB queens, non binary performers, trans performers, performance artists, and many more - anything you could think of. I knew [drag] was a place where you could be what you only see in your dreams. I currently host two Bingo shows in the city where we welcome all genders, sexual orientation, race and religion. Fun is had by all at these shows, whether you identify as LGBTQIA+ or not.

Drag is an art form, an art form that lets you portray a different character than yourself and a way of expressing yourself. I am proud of what I do and continue to inspire and empower anyone who is told to be different is to be wrong.

What is the performer being paid for this event?

Aurora Divine will be paid \$125. A typical teen program with a presenter costs between \$250-\$400, depending on the topic. An anonymous community member has donated the full cost of the program, and is sponsoring Drag Queen Bingo.

Is Aurora Divine's social media account inappropriate for kids/teens?

There are multiple performers who use the stage name Aurora Divine. Their social accounts may reflect a variety of content. Just as all of our presenters consider the audience at hand, Aurora's performance will be age-appropriate and has been discussed at length with our librarians who are specially trained and educated to work with teens. We understand that Aurora has posted content that is intended for adult consumption on her personal websites, and that adults in our community were concerned about children having access to adult content if they were to search for Aurora online. We do not market or promote performer's social media, website, content or merchandise to patrons. We also understand that, as a public institution, we might hire individuals who hold beliefs or values contrary to members of staff or the public, but that they have a right to voice their opinions on their personal or professional accounts. This is a protected First Amendment right.

FAQ Continued:

Has the library received threats?

Yes. The library and staff members have received numerous threats and aggressive emails. The library has been in contact with the Downers Grove Police Department about messages of concern.

How many messages has the library received? How many are in support/opposition?

The library has received substantial feedback about the event from community members and individuals who do not live in Downers Grove. At this time, we have received over 300 emails. Feedback is approximately evenly split, with supporters slightly outweighing opposition.

Who donated money to cover the cost of the event?

The anonymous donor who is a Downers Grove taxpayer, resident, and library card holder donated the total cost of the performer, \$125. The donor would like to note they are not affiliated with any political or social agenda, nor do they personally know anyone involved with the program. They donated to show their unequivocal support to the library and its staff.

What resources are available to learn more?

The library is currently working on a list of resources for patrons. Please check back later this week.