

Montreal daycare invites drag queen Barbada for storytime ^[1]

Over The Rainbow daycare wants every child to feel safe 'no matter what they're wearing'

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EXCERPTS

When Barbada — who is more than six feet tall without her heels on — arrived at Over The Rainbow daycare in NDG this week, the children were fascinated by her appearance.

"She looked fancy," said Mirabel Swanson, who is three years old and had never seen a drag queen before.

For some children though, this wasn't a first.

"My mommy watched RuPaul lots of times and I've seen lots of drag queens before," said Clairia Chiasson, who is four.

The Montreal drag queen brought her big pink hair, big earrings, colourful dresses and warm smile to the daycare for its very first drag queen storytime earlier this week.

Barbada, who has been doing storytime events for young children at the Grande Bibliothèque for about a year, read the children stories in French and English, including Coat of Many Colors by Dolly Parton, about a girl who is poor and gets teased about her coat.

After storytime, Barbada and the children discussed the messages in the stories: not judging people based on their clothing or their appearance, and the importance of showing each other respect.

Sébastien Potvin, the man behind the Barbada persona, is well aware of critics who say it's inappropriate for a drag queen to read stories to children.

"People who've seen drag queens in bars probably think that all drag queens are the same," Potvin said.

"Of course, in bars [jokes] can be vulgar, it's for adults... but we can adapt to any crowd," he said.

Love, respect and dignity

When daycare owner Wendy Gyetvay spotted a video online of a drag queen in the United States reading a story to young children, she immediately imagined creating a similar experience for children at her daycare.

She opened Over the Rainbow 16 years ago and chose the name because she grew up loving The Wizard of Oz — it had nothing to do with the pride flag.

But now, that flag is on the front door and Gyetvay says she wants each child who walks in to feel "love, respect and dignity ...no matter what they're wearing."

Some kids come to daycare in pyjamas and one boy sometimes comes in wearing a dress, she explained.

"I want those kids to enter the daycare feeling safe."

Initially, when Gyetvay shared the video that inspired her storytelling event, it sparked a heated debate on her personal Facebook page.

The negative comments were few but forceful and Gyetvay says they just strengthened her resolve to move forward.

First, she consulted all the parents of the children at her daycare and there were no objections, she said. In fact, it was a parent who put her in touch with Barbada.

"She is an excellent storyteller," Gyetvay said.

'The point is respect'

Potvin says most people who criticize the idea of a drag queen storytime event have never attended one, but probably should.

"You might not love drag queens after that, that's not the point," Potvin said.

"The point is to respect what we do and to respect what happens [at storytime]."

Potvin is taking time off from his job teaching music at an elementary school on the South Shore to spend more time on various projects: working as a DJ and performing drag, which he's been doing for about 14 years.

Making time to read at Over The Rainbow meant a lot to the some of the educators.

"Having a drag performer come and be in this space is deeply touching to me," said Sarah Mangle, who identifies as queer.

"In terms of signalling warmth and welcoming and celebration and safety for all gay and trans people associated with this place, including me," she said.

A chain reaction

Some of the children enjoyed Barbada's visit so much they started inviting her to their homes.

Barbada graciously explained she wouldn't have time for all those visits, but did take the time to let the children paint her nails with the bright red nail polish one child presented as a gift.

At the same time, a staff member posted a photo of Barbada on social media and within minutes a parent from a different daycare responded, wanting to know how to organize a drag queen storytime.

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