



Rainbow Camp

For LGBTQ & Allied Youth Ages 13-17

August 5-10, 2012 - Camp McDougall

***** Press Release *****

New Northeastern Ontario Rainbow Camp Hopes to End Bullying

“Come OUT and be yourself!” is the rallying cry for organizers of a new Northeastern Ontario Rainbow Camp. The camp will be a five-day retreat for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered kids, their friends and family members in a beautiful natural setting.

“In our area, and most of Ontario, there is not much in the way of public support for queer people and the camp is our humble effort to offer support,” says Harry Stewart, Chair of the Welcome Friend Association.

Stewart and his husband Chris Southin started the Welcome Friend Association after seeing the documentary “For the Bible Tells Me So.” The film inspired them to hold a conference to provide faith communities the tools to become welcoming to people of differing sexualities. Discussions among participants and members of the local queer community revealed the need for outreach to young people.

The camp is Welcome Friend’s response to that need. It comes at a good time for the area. The Algoma District has been making progress since becoming famous for discrimination in 2002. That’s when high school student Jeremy Dias took the Algoma District Public School Board to the human rights commission alleging his high school in Sault Ste. Marie discriminated against him and students like him. Five years later, the courts awarded Dias Canada’s second-largest human rights settlement.

There is now a local high school with a GSA and a local chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) is being organized. But, Stewart says, there are still many teens in the area who don't feel they can come out. As a result, a decades-old trend continues as these young people leave for more accepting larger city centers to the south as soon as they can.

North-America wide, the past year has shown a spike in the numbers of youth who are coming out. But as high profile news stories have shown, these teens are struggling with bullies --- sometimes to the extreme where they take their own lives.

This past November, the province of Ontario introduced anti-bullying legislation. The Accepting Schools Act, as it is called, requires all publicly funded schools to support students who want to create diversity clubs such as a Gay-Straight Alliance.

The legislation was introduced a month after a gay Ottawa teenager Jamie Hubley committed suicide --- a story that erupted into a media storm.

Jamie's father, Allan Hubley, who is a city councilor in Kanata had poignant words during a CBC interview about what it is like to lose a child to suicide.

"It takes forever to get to sleep and when you wake up, the first minute is fine until you remember what happened --- I lost a beautiful child who was going to make the world a better place," he said, his voice breaking.

Councilor Hubley talked about how he and his wife supported their son's coming out as a gay teen and about how Jamie felt he had support from his school guidance counselor and teachers. Yet as Jamie struggled with his own mental health, school bullying caused him grief to a point that he no longer wanted to live.

"I've been involved in a lot of things in my community and Jamie was too. . . we wanted to make the world a better place, but I couldn't fix my own boy and that's tearing me apart," said councilor Hubley.

Despite his grief, Hubley said that parents can't expect teachers to have total control of everything that's happening in the schools.

"We have to teach our kids to protect their friends and the strangers they see being picked on. We should be stepping up to try and help them."

Stewart says calls to action like the one from councilor Hubley are exactly why the Welcome Friend Association was inspired to start the Rainbow Camp.

"We are a volunteer group of both straight and queer folks who are creating a safe space where youth can come, be who they need to be and have clear, supportive mentors." says Stewart.

“At the camp, kids will have the opportunity to explore, ask questions, find others with similar concerns, and hopefully start the ball rolling on creating a safe community --- not somewhere else but right here.”

The response has been overwhelming.

“What has been amazing is the number of people, both queer and straight who want to volunteer,” says Stewart. “We’ve had so many people tell us how badly this is needed and how they wish it had been around for them.”

Currently, Rainbow Camp organizers are looking for people to sponsor camp members and put the word out to young people who may be interested in attending.

“Readers can help first, by making sure there is a camp this summer, and second, by working toward a society where there is no need for Rainbow Camp because kids have plenty of spaces to have fun where they can be true to themselves.”

Rainbow camp will be offered August 5-10 for high-school aged youth at Camp McDougall on the shores of Lake Huron, just west of Thessalon. This Camp will provide opportunities for campers to make new friends and develop skills through traditional camp programming. More than anything, Rainbow Camp is a fun place to come OUT and be yourself! Our Camp Program will include activities such as Music, Theatre, and Movement; Arts and Crafts; Nature and the Environment; Sports; Personal Storytelling through Multi-Media.

The full cost of the camp is \$275, which includes food, accommodations in rustic cabins and all activities. A registration screening is required for the limited 55 places.

Go to www.welcomefriend.ca for more info and to register. Funding sponsorship is available to eligible campers.