

Dear Mayor Lowry and Council Members of the Municipality of Mississippi Mills,

Thank you for accepting PRIDE Mississippi Mills' request to speak to you today about the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. Created in 2004 to draw attention to the violence and discrimination experienced by people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, the date May 17th was chosen to commemorate the World Health Organization's 1990 decision to declassify homosexuality as a disorder.

We live in turbulent times: a worldwide pandemic, widespread protests in multiple countries and the future feels uncertain. Change is everywhere and it's up to community members and municipal councils to lead the way. One of the most important changes needed is representation and inclusion and while there is movement in the right direction, we need more meaningful, purpose filled conversations with Canada's First Peoples, about Black Lives and about 2SLGBTQIA+ equality.

PRIDE Mississippi Mills has been leading change in our community by embracing and celebrating diversity. One small change had unexpected, far-reaching consequences, that I would like to share with you today. The journey started on a high note, met with a hurtful barrier, but ended with growth, exploration and meaningful conversations.

In July 2019, the Mississippi Valley Textile Museum installed a flagpole with a rainbow flag near the front entrance to show that our museum welcomes everyone. The flag was also meant to tell our youth they had a safe space – not just in June during Pride month, but throughout the year. The flag brought positive feedback from visitors and created new partnerships including one with the Mississippi Mills Youth Centre.

Early in 2020, the Museum and Youth Centre partnered to present "*Be Who You Are and Weave*". Springing off the rainbow flag and the partnership with the Youth Centre, community members came forward to plan for PRIDE Month in June. There had never been an official PRIDE Month in our community; we came together and formed PRIDE Mississippi Mills.

PRIDE Mississippi Mills reached out to the community:

"Pride has been the conversation in almost everyone's mind for years but Mississippi Mills has yet to hold their own pride celebration. That changed in 2020! The Mississippi Mills Youth Centre in partnership with the Mississippi Valley Textile Museum and a group of very dedicated community members have come together to conceptualize, plan and create seven days of Pride.

Pride Mississippi Mills searched for people who would be interested in submitting a story to be published in the local newspaper and on our social media. The theme for the stories is 'what's your pride story' or 'what does pride mean to you'? If you would like to share your pride story-anonymously or otherwise, please email us."

The PRIDE committee enthusiastically began planning an exciting week of in-person events:

- Sunday, Opening Day: Opening ceremony with flag raising and Lecture: “History of Marriage” by United Church Minister Heather Kincaid at the North Lanark Regional Museum.
- Monday: Spoken Word Poetry and Storytelling (open mic) at Almonte’s Curious and Kind. Audience members can write Messages of Support for performers.
- Tuesday: 2 km PRIDE Ride - June is bicycle month in Mississippi Mills- Dress up or dress up your bike, and come on out and ride with PRIDE.
- Wednesday: Outdoor movie night at Mississippi Mills Public Library.
- Thursday: Community meal at the Mississippi Mills Youth Centre with musical entertainment.
- Friday: Diverse Comedians night at the Almonte Old Town Hall.
- Saturday: Drag Mentorship Workshop at the Youth Centre during the day preparing for an evening Drag Show and Dance at the Mississippi Valley Textile Museum.

And then well... you know what happened next... COVID-19 hit and the whole world shut down. BUT even the Pandemic couldn’t stop PRIDE Mississippi Mills. We simply pivoted (we’ve heard that word before! 😊) to a one-month *virtual* celebration.

The PRIDE Mississippi Mills Committee started the ball rolling sending a PRIDE proclamation to the Municipality of Mississippi Mills.

“The Municipality of Mississippi Mills Council unanimously accepts the following proclamation:

In honour of Pride Month, Council proclaimed “June is Pride Month.” During the month of June a Pride flag will be displayed at Almonte Old Town Hall. The Municipality of Mississippi Mills supports the 2SLGBTQIA+ communities and accepts and welcomes people of diverse backgrounds and believes a diverse population leads to a more vibrant community. This month and going forward, help us spread awareness and support to the 2SLGBTQIA+ communities.”

Our planning changed drastically to become a month of online events. Our creative line-up went like this:

- Meet us Mondays! Meet Mississippi Mills’ own 2SLGBTQIA+ business owners.

- Challenge Tuesdays! PRIDE themed challenges for all ages.
- Wonder Wednesdays! 2SLGBTQIA+ videos, resources, and inspiring posts.
- Thoughtful Thursdays! Easy to follow, mini lessons with something for everyone.
- Funday Fridays! Pride inspired crafts for youth of all ages.

PRIDE was happening in Mississippi Mills!!!

Then, part way through the month, the rainbow flag, pole and all, were pulled off the museum wall overnight and the shredded flag was found later, in Metcalfe Park.

Mississippi Valley Textile Museum's board chair Lizz Thrasher posted this message:

"As an arts & heritage institution, the Mississippi Valley Textile Museum is committed to inclusivity. We strive to build community in all our operations and we try to recognize diversity wherever we can.

As part of our ongoing work, we choose to fly the PRIDE flag to indicate this commitment and our support for all, regardless of sexuality, gender or identity. We were proud to be part of this year's celebration of PRIDE, and we welcomed the Mayor and Council's support in declaring this June PRIDE month in the Municipality of Mississippi Mills.

Even if we couldn't hold a parade or social events we could show our support and take part in online events and help shape plans for other years. We could bring our commitment to diversity and inclusion to Mississippi Mills and build a community outside our museum walls.

That's why it was so disappointing to find that the PRIDE flag had been removed from its place at the front of the museum and found shredded in a nearby park.

It is apparent that not everyone in Mississippi Mills shares our commitment to inclusivity and diversity. It is disheartening to find that someone in the community felt that vandalism was a necessary action.

We want all our Museum allies to feel safe in supporting the Museum. We want our staff, volunteers, members, and students to feel that they are secure and that they matter.

We also know that this act is not representative of the entire community of Mississippi Mills. We have always been proud to be a part of Mississippi Mills, and the act of a very small minority will not change that.

This act of vandalism makes us sad and wary, but we will not give up. Our commitment remains and we will continue to work for diversity.

This act only serves to show us that we have more work to do.”

Almost as soon as the message was posted, allies in the community started a GoFundMe page, 'United Against Hate in Almonte' and within 5 short hours, \$1,000 was raised, far exceeding the \$200 goal intended to replace the flag and pole.

Mayor Lowry posted this message later the same day:

Still strong and proud.

Canada has some of the most advanced LGBT rights in the world. Since 1969, same-sex sexual activity has been legal. Since 1995, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation has been prohibited according to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Since 2003, same-sex marriage has been legal in Ontario. And in 2005, Canada became the first county outside of Europe to legalize same-sex marriage across our entire nation.

Even with these freedoms, rights and protections, some members of the 2SLGBTQ+ (Two-Spirited, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and +) community do not feel welcome, safe or accepted. Because of this, it is important to empower these members of our community and to be allies that support equal rights, gender equality and 2SLGBTQ+ social movements.

“I would like to thank the Pride Mississippi Mills team for organizing the first Pride events to be held in our community and for encouraging Council to get involved. As Mayor, I proudly proclaimed “June is Pride Month in Mississippi Mills” and we have displayed the rainbow pride flag for the first time as a Municipality. I encourage our residents to reflect on the ongoing struggle for equality members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community face and to celebrate their contributions that enhance our Municipality.

Sadly, the first Pride celebrations in Mississippi Mills have been tarnished by a senseless act earlier this week. The rainbow flag which was on display at the Mississippi Valley Textile Museum was desecrated: stolen, shredded and discarded. Whether the individual(s) responsible did this as a prank, a thrill or as an act of bigotry, the hurt it caused to members of our community touches us all.

Today, I stood in solidarity with members of the Pride Mississippi Mills team and in solidarity with the 2SLGBTQ+ community. We celebrated the fact that a hurtful act has created an immediate response of love, support and action by many. In less than 5 hours, friends, neighbours and allies raised \$1000 to replace the flag at the Museum and to purchase flags to be displayed by businesses throughout Mississippi Mills. The rainbow flag, a symbol of hope and acceptance, will now fly throughout our community.

- Love is too beautiful to be hidden in the closet. Let your love come out.*
- The world needs love more now than it has ever needed before.”*

And I sent out a message to celebrate the support we had received from our community, at such a painful time.

Proud of our Friendly Town

During these trying times, of isolation and anxiety, it warms our hearts to see the community come together to help one another. Recent events (including flag destruction, to community-led fundraising to replace the flag, to more Inclusion Flags being flown throughout the Friendly Town as a result, and to a recent surprise wedding in front of the museum) have required us to reflect on our community, our place in it, and how to go forward together. This self-reflection has served to help remind us of a very important note: how grateful we are for this town and the broader community we serve.

We as an organization strive to be as inclusive as possible and are thankful for the support that the community provides us. Without everyone's support, this museum would not have come as far as it has in as short of time as it has. Our organization was first brought into being with the community's help as a product of their growing awareness of our rich local history. This makes the community part of the bedrock of

our organization.

We as a community have helped each other grow, whether it is with local fundraising events and contributions from the Municipality of Mississippi Mills and beyond, to providing space for local peoples, artists and organizations to meet and grow. We have helped raise each other up. We have all helped to better ourselves. Because of all this, we simply wish to say thank you: thank you for all the help, good wishes and support over these last 35 years and many more years to come. And thank you, from all of us, for the memories and support we will all give each other in the future.

We as an organization will continue to listen, to speak from the heart and to be open-minded to all that our community has to say, and we will continue to do so long into the future.

As part of this community, we at the Mississippi Valley Textile Museum proudly stand with everyone in Mississippi Mills and beyond, for we are stronger together than apart. We are united, and we will move forward together.

Please keep an eye out for information on exciting new history exhibits and projects in process. More information to come shortly.

The next day, two local gentlemen reached out asking if they could marry in front of the museum the following weekend, their joy provided a beautiful moment of healing as well as a peaceful but powerful protest which we were thrilled to support. Mayor Lowry and council made a gracious gesture of support to the happy couple and to the community:

Certificate from Mississippi Mills Council.

On behalf of the mayor and council of the municipality of Mississippi Mills congratulations on the occasion of your marriage July 4, 2020.

The mayor offered personal congratulations:

Mayor Lowry's letter July 4, 2020

"Dear Andy and Tony, Best Wishes to you on this special occasion. I hope your wedding day and all your days to follow are blessed with love, laughter and happiness. I thank you for sharing this milestone in your lives with our community.

Recent events have reminded us that there is still work to be done in our community to educate and learn acceptance from all regardless of sexual orientation. The positive response of solidarity from the 2sLGBTQ+ community and from allies, has overwhelmed the smallness of a few, and underlines that everyone is welcome and belongs in Mississippi Mills As mayor I proudly proclaimed June as "Pride Month" in Mississippi Mills,

and, displayed the Rainbow flag, a symbol of hope and acceptance, for the first time as a municipality.

I encourage our residents to reflect on the ongoing struggle for equality that members of the 2sLGBTQ+ community face, and to celebrate their accomplishments that enhance our community.

Andy & Tony your union today marks a lifelong partnership and commitment, as you walk through the joys of your life together.

Sharing your vows to each other, and your love of each other, reminds us that love knows no gender.

Love has no labels. Love always wins. Love is love.

Congratulations on your wedding.

Not long after this, our museum was asked to raise the flag of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg. Given our values of excellence, integrity, responsibility, and pride, it was an honour to say YES to raising another important flag and YES to starting more conversations. Our history includes the treatment of Canada's First Peoples, it includes racism, sexism, trans and homophobia; our history includes residential schools, anti-2SLGBTQIA+ laws, and other hard to face truths. We must all be open to hearing these truths, learning from them, and telling these stories. While there is still much to be done, we have started down the right path.

We have ALL grown! The museum has gained volunteers, new partnerships have been created and new and meaningful conversations have begun! And... thanks to the many community members donating to the Go Fund Me, we have an amazing collection of rainbow flags for the whole community! One flag torn down ... 100 flags raised, on businesses, in store windows, and living room windows.

May we go forward in solidarity with pride and integrity.

Respectfully,

Michael Rikley-Lancaster

Executive Director/ Curator Mississippi Valley Textile Museum

Chair PRIDE Mississippi Mills