

On the very first day of my very first, very serious, permanent full-time job, I helped host a drag queen storytime session. It was in a public library on the quiet side of a town that was trying to be a city, and I didn't exactly expect to see such a clear display of allyship this far from Wellington's Ivy Bar.

I was a closeted lesbian in my early 20's. I had previously come out a grand total of two times: my best friend (on purpose) and my little brother (not-so on purpose). But other than that, I was doing my best to keep my head down. So when I showed up to work on my first day at the library, seeing the drag performers so comfortably embraced by this small community caused a bit of a re-evaluation in my mind.

I rushed home to my laptop, and within the next few days there was a parcel at the door with my name on it. I hadn't even received my first paycheck yet, but it was suddenly essential for me to own a few extra things to display on my staff lanyard. A small rainbow flag pin, the 'she/her' pronouns, and a badge with the colours from the lesbian flag. I remember being terrified the first few weeks, which was not warranted.

I mean, there was one time a woman cautiously asked me if the library management "forces" staff to wear those badges. I don't think she was talking about my dinosaur or cat ones. I looked at my coworker, who was wearing very similar ones (sans dinosaurs), and we replied, together, with an equally cautious: no. And nothing bad happened - the woman said "okay," and just went on with her day.

I was learning that the library was a very safe place to be visibly queer. And if I was also learning that the aforementioned pride-badge-wearing coworker was giving me more and more tummy butterflies, then it wasn't the end of the world! But it again reinforced that something had changed, because those same feelings definitely were the end of the world when I was in high school.

The two of us worked together on a heap of LGBTQ+ projects for the library. Making pride displays, running safe spaces for queer rangatahi to hang out and collage, creating booklets of our favourite rainbow books in the library collection - we did it all. And the backlash from the public? Absolutely nothing.

When Pride Month rolled around again, I felt like I had really evolved with my queer identity. For the first time, I truly understood what 'out and proud' meant. So when my manager asked if I could co-host the upcoming drag king story time event, I heartily agreed.



The audience loved it. My favourite part of the event was after we had finished reading the stories. We could see that the kids had a million questions they wanted to ask of our special guest. I heartily invited the audience to ask him questions... crickets. They were just too shy for it. So I broke the ice, and loudly asked him a “how do you make your hair look so nice?” and a “do you ever get too warm wearing this outfit?”

He was a pro and could see exactly what I was trying to do, so he answered in kind. When it came time for our drag king to go home, a queue of children, tightly gripping onto their parents' hands, slowly but steadily formed in front of him.

They felt brave enough to keep talking to him and ask some more silly questions! I was (and still am) so proud that I played a part in that.

Annoyingly, good things often come to an end. One of my coworkers sent an all-staff email talking about how dangerous drag storytime events are for a child's mental health. She also stated that those who organised and hosted this event must be “child groomers”. I forwarded it to HR, and senior leaders were made aware of it too. She never received a formal warning, and HR never replied to me about my concerns. She's still working in the same library to this day.

I ended up getting burnt out for unrelated reasons, so I requested a transfer for another local library. The team is really lovely, so long as you ignore the transphobic and homophobic jokes that are lightly peppered into the odd conversation. That's just how it goes sometimes. It occasionally gets me down for a day or so, but I reckon I'm good at bouncing back.

The thing that's harder to ignore here is the fact that every week, one of our rooms gets hired out by Destiny Church for a public event for “all women”.

I don't deny that many women in our community probably do benefit from this event being run. But after everything that Destiny Church has done recently, chief amongst them being the February attack at Te Atatū library, it leaves such a sour taste in my mouth at seeing them here. And now I'm the only queer person in this workplace. Hiding my identity was once my default situation, but it comes after so much growth for me – it feels strange quietly going back. In my professional life, that is. My personal and home life is still wonderfully gay, and nothing can change that (that coworker and I are now engaged and we're so happy together).

