

The Washington Post

When drag queens lead children's story time, 'a lot of hugs' — and controversy — follow



Joyce Krom, a librarian in Huntington Woods, Mich., started the public library's Drag Queen Storytime more than a year ago. She says the children's program, which emphasizes gender diversity and acceptance, aligns with the community's values. (Sean Proctor for The Washington Post)

By **Trevor Bach**

January 25

HUNTINGTON WOODS, Mich. — The last time drag queens came to the public library here, two dozen children and their parents crowded into a cozy room to enjoy holiday stories. Jessica J'Adore — decked out in a curly

red wig, a shiny green cocktail dress and elaborate makeup — read “The Night Before Christmas,” while another costumed queen offered up a lively Hanukkah rhyming book. One little boy gave a pipe-cleaner bracelet to his favorite performer.

“There were a lot of hugs,” librarian Joyce Krom said. “Kids love holidays, and they’re just very excited. It was a lot of fun.”

It was also the latest flash point in what’s become a noxious national controversy. Variations of Drag Queen Story Hour — which aims to teach children gender diversity and acceptance — have been sprouting nationwide in libraries large and small. But their popularity has provoked an increasingly fierce backlash from conservative religious groups, with Huntington Woods the latest target.

In recent months in this small suburb just north of Detroit, an intense opposition campaign stoked by outsiders has consumed public discussion and galvanized support for the program. Tensions may escalate further Saturday, with both protesters and counterprotesters expected to descend on the handsome brick library as the next story time begins.

“I believe we’re in a culture war right now,” said Rich Penkoski, a minister with the Tennessee-based group Warriors for Christ who will lead one demonstration. He has fought similar events in multiple states and anticipates dozens of people joining him in Huntington Woods. “We need to fight just as much as everybody else.”

Drag Queen Story Hour was created in late 2015 by a San Francisco writer and new mother who wanted to provide young children with both a charismatic performance and cultural lesson. The [DQSH organization](#) now counts chapters in Milwaukee, New Orleans and other cities, though dozens of libraries across the country have been inspired to create their own versions.

Krom, an experienced librarian with a warm, thoughtful air, nose ring and cat-eye glasses, began researching the idea for Michigan’s iteration in 2016. In the wake of that November’s election, she said, many of her patrons were eager for efforts that offered a rebuke to the kind of bigotry and meanness they associated with the new president. In the affluent, liberal suburb, a drag queen story time resonated.

“I think this was the program that they were really looking for, that they could really latch onto and say, ‘This is a very different ideology from what the president is putting out there,’” she said.

Still, ahead of the first presentation in December 2017, Krom alerted the local police chief, just in case. There were no problems. The evening drew more than 100 curious kids and their parents — who sprawled on the carpet at the community recreation center, where Krom had relocated things because so many people signed up.

The star was Raven Turner, a.k.a. Raven Divine Cassadine, a black transgender woman and the reigning Miss Motor City Pride. She wore a flowing white gown and matching rhinestone heels, earrings and bracelet. Atop her long tresses was a silver tiara. “The kids loved it,” she said. “Especially the little girls, they thought I was a princess.”



Raven Turner, whose professional name is Raven Divine Cassadine, read to children at the first Drag Queen Storytime that her hometown library in Huntington Woods, Mich., hosted in 2017. (Sean Proctor for The Washington Post)

Turner, 39, grew up near Huntington Woods and often visited its library. Even as a young child, she said, she felt different from her male cousins.

But she saw virtually no trans or gender-nonconforming role models to look up to. School, where she says she stood out for being feminine, was often difficult.

She was in her early 20s when she gave her first drag performance: “When I stepped onstage it opened a whole new world for me — and a whole new life.” She began living as a woman while pursuing a professional drag career.

For her story-reading debut, Turner featured two decidedly gender-positive books, “Be Who You Are” and “My Princess Boy.” She, too, had been a princess boy and was often bullied, she told the kids, but her friend Natalie — who was in the audience — helped her stand up for herself. “This crown is because I like to be proud,” she declared. “And you should be proud of yourself and be proud of your friends, too.”

Ben Falik’s 8-year-old daughter, Phoebe, attended early on. “It’s dress-up, and it’s all the positive messaging,” he said. “Just good stories, told with a lot of flair.”

Opponents feel differently, arguing that the events confuse children about gender norms and represent a dangerous new front in advocates’ desire to impose a sweeping pro-gay and transgender ideology.

The national group MassResistance — a [“pro-family activist organization”](#) that the Southern Poverty Law Center [characterizes as an anti-LGBT hate group](#) — has made the drag queen story hours a rallying cry, organizing boycotts and filing lawsuits. New protests erupted this month in [Colorado](#), [Indiana](#) and [Tennessee](#), and it took [litigation by the American Civil Liberties Union](#) to end a ban the public library in Lafayette, La., imposed.

“Any culture, any society, that’s loosened up their sexual mores has collapsed,” minister Penkoski said recently. “We’re repeating history.”

Not all criticism of Krom’s efforts has come from outside Huntington Woods.

City Commissioner Allison Iversen wrote before the first story time to say that, while she supported teaching diversity, drag queens were entertainment meant for adults. “Children are innocent little beings,” her

letter said, “and we, as a society, should be banding together to preserve that innocence.”

Though Iversen said she was contacted by a dozen or so residents who agreed with her, she represented the town’s main voice of dissent. And the issue remained civil for months. After one meeting with Krom, the two “just agreed to disagree,” according to the librarian, and ended up working together on a different project.

Everything changed in early December when MassResistance homed in on the local program and told sympathizers to flood officials with calls. A barrage of emails, sent to city employees, likened it to child endangerment and called for library staff to be fired.

“I laughed it off,” Krom said. Iversen didn’t. Her reply to one email said she had “been trying to get this stopped since it started” and encouraged the individual to “get more people involved.” Iversen later said she had mistakenly believed the email was sent by a resident and rejected some of its language. But MassResistance, claiming her support, announced a demonstration. Many in the town were outraged.

“They have zero right to dictate what we do or do not do in our community,” said Danielle McGuire, a mother of two and a civil rights historian. “As the segregationists would call it in the South, we don’t need outside agitators.”

In mid-December, some 200 people filed into the recreation center gymnasium for a City Commission meeting. Most planned to demand that Iversen resign immediately. But she had already done so; with an out-of-town move in the works, she quit early because of the acrimony.

“I wasn’t going to be the whipping boy,” Iversen said in an interview, recounting the harassment she’d gotten on social media. “I’ve tried to be someone who is an advocate for everyone. It made me sad that people were that quick to turn.”

When the mayor announced her departure, the gymnasium burst into applause. What followed for the rest of the evening was a remarkable display of civic discourse.

Speaker after speaker took the microphone to comment on the drag queen story hour. The vast majority were in favor and praised Krom and Turner

for championing diversity. A transgender high schooler defended the program. Others expressed a spectrum of opinions on love and toxic masculinity, the culture wars, gender rights, and liberal hypocrisy.

For Krom, the outpouring of support has been vindicating. The controversy, she added, has only affirmed the program's importance. She's ready for Saturday, when she expects an outpouring of excited kids and a bedazzled drag queen and king to gather in the library's art gallery for perhaps the largest story time yet.

"I very firmly believe that we are on the right side of history," Krom said. "And the fact that we are touching so many nerves . . . tells me that we need to keep going."

Correction: An earlier version of this story incorrectly quoted minister Rich Penkoski about the loosening of sexual mores, not social mores.