



Pride Month: Ms. Harmonica Sunbeam brings
Drag Queen Story Hour to town



Harmonica Sunbeam will read stories, sing songs, and lead crafts. COURTESY KIDVILLE

Drag Queen Story Hour
Featuring Ms. Harmonica Sunbeam

Thursday, June 20, 3-4:15 p.m.
Kidville, 516 Valley Road
tinyurl.com/y66s557g
973-826-0350

Sunday, June 30, 11 a.m.
Bnai Keshet, 99 South Fullerton Ave.
Bnaikeshet.org
973-746-4889

dragqueenstoryhour.org

By GWEN OREL

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There may be a little more purple than at other story hours.

There may be a few more sparkles.

Books may include “Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress,” Christine Baldacchino’s story about a boy who wears a dress to school.

But another book read at the Drag Queen Story Hour may well be Mo Willems’ beloved “Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!”

Drag Queen Story Hour is not so different from any story hour, just “taken up a notch,” said Ms. Harmonica Sunbeam, who will appear on Thursday, June 20, at 3 p.m., at Kidville Montclair, for Drag Queen Story Hour and Rainbow Brunch (despite the late hour) and at Bnai Keshet on Sunday, June 30, at 11 a.m.

“I mix in new messages with things they are already familiar with,” Sunbeam said.

She has been working Drag Queen story hours around New Jersey and New York for a few years.

Drag Queen Story Hour, a nonprofit organization, was started by Michelle Tea and RADAR Productions in 2015. It began as drag queens reading to children in U.S. libraries, and now includes drag queens all over the world presenting literary and creative programming.

David Grice, Kidville’s early childhood development manager, was eager to bring an experience for children

and their guardians that would “celebrate what makes people unique.” He said he’d brought his own conservative parents to a drag queen show for his most recent birthday party. People find it easier to accept other communities when that culture surrounds them, he said.

Jessica Brater, a Montclair State assistant professor of theater and a member of Bnai Keshet, suggested the event to her rabbis after seeing a synagogue in Brooklyn host DQSH during Purim.

“I got really jealous,” Brater said with a laugh. “I thought, ‘If they’re doing it, why can’t we?’” She intends to bring her husband, 6-year-old and 3-year-old to DQSH, which takes place the day after BK hosts a Pride Shabbat, which will include a speaker, readings and songs.

Ariann Weitzman, BK’s associate rabbi and director of congregational learning, enthusiastically agreed to host Harmonica Sunbeam. “It entirely fits our mission of being inclusive,” she said.

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“Drag queens are part of the common culture now,” Sunbeam said. “Fifteen years ago, I couldn’t walk into a restaurant and ask, ‘Would you be interested in a drag brunch or bingo night?’ Now more places are open to having diverse entertainment.”

Pride month is a perfect opportunity to celebrate — but there’s still a long way to go, she and Grice agree.

Grice received a negative call last week, his first ever. The caller accused Kidville of encouraging body dysmorphia in children, and that celebrating a man dressed up as a woman, using female pronouns, was encouraging children to lie to themselves.

“It’s so disheartening that that’s the message [they understood],” Grice said. “It’s a colorful character telling a story. Children embrace a colorful character.”

Weitzman loves the upbeat spirit of DQSH. The 1969 Stonewall riots, an uprising that followed a raid on a gay bar, were how pride month became Pride Month, she pointed out. “There is also the shadow of the AIDS crisis as part of our commemoration. I wanted to make sure we are emphasizing joy.”

And Harmonica Sunbeam is joyful, and excited to be with kids, Weitzman said. DQSH is for the entire community, because “every kid lives in a community.”

For Brater, it’s important that her children understand that there are different ways to express masculinity and femininity. “I am constantly combating ‘Boys don’t wear nail polish’ or ‘Boys don’t wear pink,’” she said. “I

want them to wear nail polish or pink if they want to.”

Her reply to those who say, won't it encourage children to be drag queens is “What's wrong with that?”

If you look at it a certain way, Sunbeam said, drag queens have been in popular culture forever.

Daffy Duck and Tom and Jerry sometimes dress up.

“We all grew up watching cartoons,” she said.

So she's not surprised that small children have no trouble accepting her.

But the children surprise her in other ways.

“They will tell you about their parents. I read a story called ‘It's Okay to be Different,’ by Todd Parr. When I read ‘It's OK to have no hair,’ someone will raise a hand and say ‘My mom has no hair.’ And Mom is there.

“Well, OK.”