

What happens at a Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH)? While some people associate drag performances solely with the bawdy humor of a cabaret, drag is a form of performance that existed even before Shakespeare employed it in his plays. Drag queens are artists who create glamorous, playful characters for any audience as the situation demands. At the family friendly DQSH at the South Burlington Public Library, fabulous drag queens will read children’s stories focused on themes of diversity, inclusion, social justice, and creative expression. They may also sing songs and offer a simple craft—in our case, paper crowns to decorate. Participants of all ages—both the young and the young at heart—are welcome to join.

People often also wonder why a library might host this type of program. Many of us are familiar with the role that books can play in offering “mirrors and windows” (Rudine Simms Bishop, 1990) to young readers. A mirror is a literary work that reflects a reader’s own culture, values, and experiences. Seeing themselves represented in stories supports children’s identity development. In contrast, windows in literature offer readers a glimpse into the lives of others. Further, some literary works can operate like a prism: as a prism refracts and changes light, books-- and programs—can disrupt and challenge our ideas. (Uma Krishnaswami, 2019). Library programs—as well as books— can offer mirrors, windows, and prisms to patrons.

In its role as a mirror, DQSH meets the diversity, equity and inclusion standards outlined by the American Library Association (ALA) which states that “socially excluded, marginalized and underrepresented people, not just the mainstream majority, should be able to see themselves reflected in the resources and programs that libraries offer.” Seeing positive representations of people who break gender stereotypes may be especially affirming for LGBTQIA+ youth, who face higher than average risk of bullying, depression, and suicide. As a window and as a prism, DQSH provides a model for inclusion, empathy, and respect for others. Children who interact with many types of people become adults who successfully meet the challenges of living in a diverse world.

DQSH serves a weighty purpose in upholding the library’s commitment to providing a welcoming space for diverse voices and perspectives. The event itself promises to be playful, creative, and fun. Learn more about DQSH at the national website dragqueenstoryhour.org. Learn more about our performers at nightpayne.com. For more information about DQSH and other events at the South Burlington Public Library, please check our website southburlingtonlibrary.org.

A version of this letter originally appeared in The Valley Reporter, and was authored by Amanda Gates, Youth Services Librarian at the Warren Public Library in 2018.