

Safe, Welcoming Space at Neighbour to Neighbour

If you're looking to be an ally to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, supporting the work of Neighbour to Neighbour may be a good place to start.

By [Jason Allen](#)

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Every time I run for office, I make a new friend who ends up being a constant presence for the next few years. In 2018, I was lucky enough to meet Lyla Miklos.

Lyla is a tireless promoter of Queer and Trans causes and events, and we share a love of music and musical theatre, so when she started sharing news of a Two Spirit LGBTQ+ coffee house at Neighbour to Neighbour's Community Food Centre, I figured I'd check it out.

To be honest, with all the turmoil going on with the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, I had been looking for a way to show my support. As an ally, it's not always clear how to be as helpful as possible. I had called the mayor and others out on Twitter, and family and friends were writing letters to City Hall and the Spec, but I couldn't figure out the best way to contribute.

However, I figured showing up to the coffee house would be one way I could show I cared about what that community was going through.

I had never been to the Neighbour to Neighbour's Community Food Centre before, which is in a part of the mountain I had never visited, so when I walked in the door I had no idea what to expect.

The place was packed with people of all ages and ethnicities, it was noisy and the atmosphere was one of celebration. It felt like it was going to be a good night.

Over the course of the evening, I was wowed by four performers who sang and played guitar, drums and mandolin. Eoren Raine, Sarah Hillson, Aluminum Garden, and Emma Beckett were by turns poignant, heartfelt, passionate and adorably nervous. It was a great evening of music.

In addition, there were service providers from the Aids Network, Xperience Annex, Spectrum, Hamilton Trans Health Coalition and the McMaster Students Union Pride Community Centre. They had

informative displays and were happy to tell you about services and resources that aren't always well known on the mountain.

Finally, from the microphone, one of the organizers, Danielle Boisoineau, mentioned that their advocacy workers were available to help with anything from finances to health advice to just listening. The evening felt supportive, upbeat, positive and fun. It was a delight to attend.

As with most events that run that smoothly, a lot of planning had to have gone into it. I was surprised at how quickly it had come together.

"It was absolutely triggered by recent events" according to Shane Farroway, Communications and Events Coordinator for Neighbour to Neighbour. Shane explained that the Community Food Centre is a unique service in Hamilton that looks to, in his words, "Build community through food."

Farroway grew up on the west mountain, blocks from Neighbour to Neighbour's main location and describes some of the challenges with accessing services there. "Transit isn't great, and there are no bike lanes to speak of."

Living there and accessing services like those provided by N2N often requires access to a car. And the services N2N offers are diverse.

While there to meet Farroway, I saw their community enterprise book store, the food bank, and passed the community and settlement services offices. There was also a dental bus parked in the driveway and a gentleman was there awaiting an extraction.

The Community Food Centre offers a weekly International Kitchen program along with a community supper. The International Kitchen brings people together from all walks of life to make and share food from their country of origin. Once the food is prepared, everyone sits down to enjoy a communal lunch together. The Thursday I visited, community members had prepared dolmades.

"We also have a community supper every Thursday evening that is open to all to come and share a meal with their neighbours." Shane explains.

As the only full-service food bank and multi-service agency on the mountain, Shane added that N2N attempts to bridge the gap between service providers clustered downtown and neighbourhoods in need on the mountain, such as the Rolston neighbourhood where the food centre is located.

Rolston was identified as one of ten priority neighbourhoods by the city, and is home to a large number of new Canadians and shut in seniors. As such it experiences levels of poverty to rival anywhere else in Hamilton

Along with the other services, Neighbour to Neighbour offers a Community Action Program of advocacy workers with lived experience in poverty, racialized issues and marginalization. It was this team that first floated the idea of reaching out to the Two Spirit LGBTQ+ community on the mountain, days after the violence that marred this year's Pride event.

When asked about the fault lines that seem to be spidering out through various Hamilton communities over this issue, Boissoneau is clear. "The only divide in this city is between love and hate. We wanted to create a space for folks from the queer and trans community to come and know they had a place where they were welcome, and were safe, and could be their authentic selves."

The evening was from all reports a success, but this was not a one-off. When I asked Faraway how they would define success moving forward, he replied "When the community shows up." That's exactly what they are hoping the 2SLGBTQIA+ community will do.

After the coffee house, feedback surveys were collected that will guide the programming that the Community Food Centre will offer this community. The Centre has already heard loud and clear that future events must be hosted and driven by members of that community.

Danielle and her team are more than willing to take a step back and provide logistical support, a location, and any other help they can. "We don't want to assume we know what's best for the community" she explained. As more feedback is collected, the team plans a debrief of the evening and will begin to pursue next steps.

If you'd like to be part of this process, and you identify as Two Spirit LGBTQ+, Boissoneau wants to hear from you. You can reach her at dboissoneau@n2ncentre.com.

N2N clearly offers a vital access to services for people living on the Mountain, so it's a logical step that they would extend a welcome to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in a time they were experiencing some challenges in acceptance in our city. If you're looking, as I was, to be an ally, supporting the work of N2N may be a good place to start.

In the meantime, stay tuned for more events and programming from the Community Food Centre of Neighbour to Neighbour, and perhaps see how you can get involved in their exceptional work on the Mountain.