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FEATURED

Drag queens bring sparkle to MCPL's children story time

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Ben Grimwood as Bendovah Plenti, left, and Billy Vorglas as Envy Debeaute, read to children Friday during Drag Queen Story Time at the Monroe County Public Library in Bloomington. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times

The children sat criss-cross applesauce on a vibrantly-colored carpet, their eyes bright and transfixed on their Friday morning story time readers.

Miss Plenti towered above them in silver platform heels. Her dress, purple and covered in sequins, was form-fitted with a skirt that flared at the bottom, mermaid style.

Miss Envy was an actual mermaid.

Bendovah Plenti and Envy Debeauté, both Bloomington drag queens, were the guests of honor at the Monroe County Public Library's first Drag Queen Story Time. For about an hour, they entertained 50 or so children ages 2 to 6, reading books, singing and dancing and offering them the experience of interacting with someone like no one they've ever met before.

"What do toddlers love more than fancy ladies?" said Kelleigh Juers, who brought her 2-and-a-half year old daughter Rhys to Drag Queen Story Time. "I felt like the kids were really engaged. It is suited to Bloomington."

Ben Grimwood, who's drag name is Bendovah Plenti, loves reading and playing with his fiancé's little niece, and jumped at the opportunity to read to other local kids. He didn't have such opportunities as a child attending public library story time events in Evansville.

"Growing up I wouldn't say any gay media was any part of my life," Grimwood said in an interview before the library event. "The purpose of the program is to show children you can be your authentic self, and it's OK to be proud and OK with who you are, OK to be different than who society wants you to be."

Billy Vorgias, drag name Envy Debeauté, worked with the children's librarians to choose the age-appropriate books the queens would read aloud. "Big Bob Little Bob," written by James Howe and illustrated by Laura Ellen Anderson; "Red: A Crayon's Story," by Michael Hall; and "What I Like About Me!" Written by Allia Zobel Nolan and illustrated by Miki Sakamoto were intentionally selected to convey a similar message.

"It was about the messages that they had," Vorgias said. "Being yourself, loving yourself no matter what, be who you are no matter what anyone tells you."

The event was so popular that it filled to capacity weeks before and was moved to a larger room in the library to accommodate children on a waitlist. It also sparked some controversy in the community. Library staff answered many calls from library patrons concerned about exposing children to drag queens, who are typically men or gender fluid performers dressed in exaggerated women's fashions.

But the messages of the stories were exactly what mothers like Molly Rosenberg, who brought her 5-year-old daughter Mae Seavey to Drag Queen Story Time, want their children to be exposed to.

"The types of stories they told here were so uncontroversial and so good for developing children," Rosenberg said.

Even with the event's popularity, library staff will have to weigh whether taking nasty phone calls and reading vicious online comments is worth the work that goes into putting on another Drag Queen Story Time.

"We're always trying to figure out how much we can do and where are we helping to meet community needs or where are we helping to collaborate with some shared outcomes," said Lisa Champelli, children strategist for the Monroe County Public Library. "Because this went so well and because we had so many people ask us if we might do it again, it's certainly something we will consider having again in the future."

Parents have the right to determine what is appropriate for their child, library staff and Friday's guests agreed. Those who don't want to attend a program like Drag Queen Story Time will hopefully be able to enjoy one of the library's many different other activities and events.

"If this experience offers that to these families, then that's wonderful," Grimwood said. "I'm not there to impress myself upon their children. These people really want me to be part of their child's experience."

Mae summed up that experience in one word.

"They were sparkly," the 5-year-old said.

"We thought there would be lots of sparkles, and we weren't disappointed," her mother laughed.

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