

# A 2SLGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY PHOTOVOICE ART SHOW AND COMMUNITY CONVERSATION ON 2SLGBTQIA+ SAFETY AND WELLBEING WITHIN BRANTFORD AND THE COUNTY OF BRANT

## DISCUSSION FINDINGS



Prepared By:

Christine Wildman

# Partnership Acknowledgement

This event was a collaboration between local 2SLGBTQIA+ organizations, namely, **The Bridge Brant** and **Workshop: Building Safer Spaces**, as well as **Dr. Christine Wildman**.

**The Bridge Brant**, a volunteer-based grassroots initiative, is dedicated to identifying and addressing inequities faced by the 2SLGBTQIA+ communities in Brantford and the County of Brant. Their mission involves advocating for acceptance and inclusion and aiming to eradicate stigma, bullying, and discrimination across all facets of community life.

**Workshop: Building Safer Spaces**, a non-profit organization, focuses on providing education and consultation services. Their objective is to foster the creation of safer and more inclusive communities, ensuring that 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals have equitable access to services and opportunities to lead vibrant and thriving lives.

Dr. Christine Wildman (she/they) is a long-time resident and queer settler in the Brantford community. Christine is an activist with many years of experience in working in the gender-based violence sector and in community organizing. Christine has a PhD in sociology with a specialization in identities and social inclusion and is a critical community-engaged researcher. Their research has focused on 2SLGBTQIA+ needs, experiences of intimate partner violence, and access to services and community in small to medium population centres.

The showcased artwork at the Art Show and Community Conversation featured photographs captured by local 2SLGBTQIA+ community members during the initial 10 months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. For further details on participants' photos, refer to our theme-based digital narrated books available at The Bridge Brant [[HERE](#)].



# Background for Event:

Recently, we have witnessed a distressing surge in anti-2SLGBTQIA+ hate, with lawmakers recording a 64% increase and hate crimes targeting our populations, and several cities reporting alarming spikes in such incidents during the first half of 2023.

Locally, we have found ourselves confronting such hate with the presence of a local branch of the so-called "1MillionMarch4Children" group, which took a stance against 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion policies in Canadian schools and provided wildly misinformed information about the Ontario education curriculum, while masquerading under the guise of "parental rights". The group protested several locations throughout the city of Brantford, and the larger group did the same, across the country.

Counter protests were also held across the country. A local counter protest ensued, where 2SLGBTQIA+ community members and allies were met with hate speech, enduring chants like "go home groomers, go home", offensive comments, and signs calling 2SLGBTQIA+ populations groomers, and pedophiles. Additionally, there were signs challenging the existence of Trans identities. During the protests we witnessed local police officers taking photos, high-fiving, and hugging members of the anti-2SLGBTQIA+ hate group. We also endured members of the hate group coming into the counter protest, shoving cameras in our faces, and making offensive comments while police officers looked on. When participants from the counter protest advanced, even a single step, police officers immediately directed them to retreat, indicating evident favouritism towards the anti-2SLGBTQIA+ group, and revealing a clear bias against 2SLGBTQIA+ community members and allies.

As a result, a complaint was made to the Brantford Police Department, specifically regarding an on duty uniformed police officer hugging an anti-2SLGBTQIA+ protester and then having a less than empathetic exchange with some 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. The youth were concerned about the clear display of support for anti-2SLGBTQIA hate by police. To protect the identities of the 2SLGBTQIA+ youth involved, a complaint was made to the Brantford Police Department, as a collaboration between the Sexual Assault Centre of Brant, Nova Vita, and WorQshop: Building Safer Spaces, to which there has been no response from the Brantford Police Department, further highlighting local law enforcement's anti-2SLGBTQIA+ bias and lack of care and concern for our communities.

The repercussions of this rising hate are significant, causing trauma within our communities, and posing threats to the safety and well-being of 2SLGBTQIA+ populations, particularly those with intersecting identities.

To address these concerns, we organized an art show to showcase the resilience and creativity of our communities and provided a platform for individuals to share their experiences and ideas for creating safer and more inclusive communities.

# Background Art & Research:

The art show consisted of photos taken by local 2SLGBTQIA+ community members for a community based photovoice research project looking at 2SLGBTQIA+ community and life during the COVID-19 pandemic. The photos represent five significant themes mirroring local experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals.

**The first theme:** “A society Not Made By or For Us: The Challenge of Cis-Heteronormativity” showcased photos depicting the challenges arising from the naturalization and normalization of heterosexuality and binary genders. This societal framework places 2SLGBTQIA+ people in a constant cycle of having to come out, creating ongoing difficulties throughout their lives. Participants highlighted how cis-heteronormativity assumes everyone is or should be heterosexual and cisgender making it challenging for some to recognize their own identities until later in life.



Moreover, the theme underscored the pervasive impact of bias, discrimination, lack of acceptance, and institutional exclusion of 2SLGBTQIA+ populations. Participants shared experiences of being excluded from various institutions, including churches, hospitals, police, workplaces, and even public washrooms, emphasizing the profound impact of discriminatory effects stemming from cis-heteronormativity.

**The second theme:** “Challenging the Status quo in Everyday Life” explored participants resilience in confronting cis-heteronormativity. Participants discussed various daily acts of resistance, from merely existing as a defiance of societal norms to openly, expressing love, and embracing their authentic selves. Some employed unique ways of displaying pride and symbols for visibility, while others defied, gender, norms, choosing not to conform to traditional feminine/masculine expectations. Despite the constraints imposed by cis-heteronormative structures, participants exhibited resistance and resilience by being visible, challenging gender norms, creating safe spaces, and embracing their authentic selves in a society that predominantly uphold traditional gender norms and compulsory heterosexuality.

**The third theme:** “Community Priorities” emphasized key community priorities to challenge cis-heteronormativity, including educating society about 2SLGBTQIA+ populations for greater inclusion and acceptance, and addressing discrimination and bias. These priorities centre around representation, inclusion, acceptance, and safety, envisioning a society that values diversity and is welcoming and caring of all individuals.

**The fourth theme:** “2SLGBTQIA+ Community is a Feeling... An Experience... A Sense of Belonging” explored 2SLGBTQIA+ community within a cis-heteronormative society, acknowledging the challenges of discrimination and exclusion. The importance of specific 2SLGBTQIA+ communities is highlighted as it provides a sense of belonging, acceptance, care, love, inclusion, and safety. Participants discussed diverse aspects of community, including chosen family, online and media communities, communities of two, and supportive networks. Community is described as strong, resilient, diverse, loving, unique, and supportive. Defining community proves challenging, due to varied experiences, with some viewing it as social groups or spaces influencing behavior. It can also be characterized by common goals, shared geography, or smaller support networks.

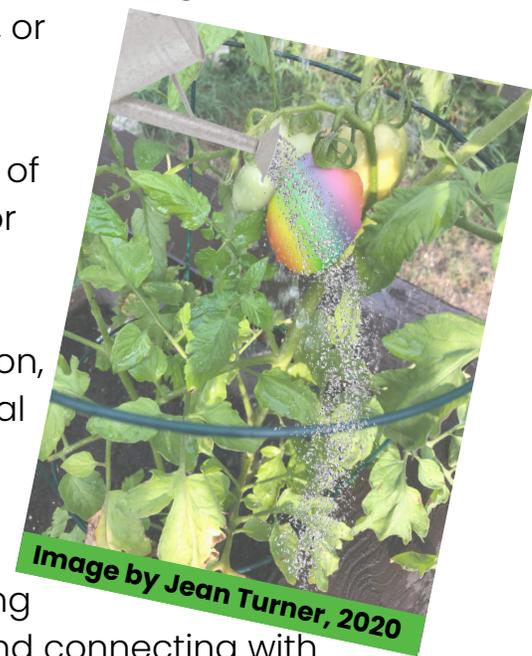
Project findings reveal diverse experiences and perspectives of community. Some emphasized close connections with one or two individuals, while others valued, larger groups or chosen families. However, participants stressed that community is inherently accepting, caring, and collectively created. Inclusion, diversity, interconnectedness, and growth emerged as central features of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

**The fifth and final theme:** “Life During Pandemic Times” examined the impact of COVID-19 on participants, highlighting challenges, experiencing worries or fears, coping with loss, and connecting with the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. The pandemic significantly affected daily life, imposing measures like mask wearing, physical distancing, and stay at home policies. While safety remained crucial, the pandemic took on a political dimension, allowing participants to resist cis-heteronormativity and create visibility, pride, and allyship. Mask wearing became a form of community making, signalling belonging through pride themed masks.

Masks, however, presented a dual role – offering both visibility and invisibility. While some found invisibility, essential for survival, others faced challenges as masks, obscured identities, and diminished the pride in self-representation.

Despite the pandemic's impact on feelings of loss and isolation, participants displayed resilience through coping strategies and unique ways of celebrating pride. They found avenues to connect with and support the larger Brantford and County of Brant communities, and emphasized the multifaceted experiences during this challenging time.

**For more information** regarding participants photos, view our theme based digital narrated books at **The Bridge Brant** [[HERE](#)].



# The Community Conversation:

The accompanying Community Conversation delved into strategies for enhancing inclusivity and safety for 2SLGBTQIA+ communities in Brantford and the County of Brant. Participants offered valuable insights and recommendations:

## 1. Inclusive Initiatives:

- Establish/provide dedicated and specific 2SLGBTQIA+ spaces for community gathering.
- Display “safe spaces” or rainbow stickers/posters on doors of establishments = representation of our communities.
- Address the health needs of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities locally.
- Implement gender neutral washrooms in city/county owned spaces.
- Create more 2SLGBTQIA+ art/murals to promote visibility and inclusion.
- Develop a 2SLGBTQIA+ village or designated street as a safe space (would need to actually be safe).
- Look at city policies to make them stronger and more inclusive.

## 2. Community Support:

- Acknowledge and support the voices of queer and trans youth.
- Create sustainable funding for 2SLGBTQIA+ cultural events so that all the work doesn't fall on 2SLGBTQIA+ volunteers (to get funds, plan and run events).
- Host city and county events promoting inclusivity.
- Conduct 2SLGBTQIA+ diversity and inclusion campaigns to address marginalization and promote 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion.
- Provide mandatory 2SLGBTQIA+ trauma-informed training for police and other institutions and governing bodies.
- Ensure visible support by allies.
- Realize/acknowledge what happened at the anti-2SLGBTQIA+ protest as being traumatizing, work to do better and to support 2SLGBTQIA+ communities visibly and loudly.

## 3. Safety Concerns:

- Address systematic 2SLGBTQIA+ bias and discrimination locally.
- Counter reactionary Christian fundamentalist propaganda.
- Foster community-based safety mechanisms.
- Advocate for accessible resources and support for 2SLGBTQIA+ populations.



#### **4. Overcoming Barriers:**

- Establish dedicated spaces for 2SLGBTQIA+ people.
- Provide funding for 2SLGBTQIA+ gatherings.
- Create spaces for 2SLGBTQIA+ people hosted by 2SLGBTQIA+ people.
- Provide tech literacy for 2SLGBTQIA+ community members to address online safety concerns.
- Create 2SLGBTQIA+ recreation opportunities, and sports leagues.
- Improve publicity and communication about 2SLGBTQIA+ community events.
- Establish drop-in centres specifically for 2SLGBTQIA+ populations.
- Dedicated 2SLGBTQIA+ space that people can attend anytime (bookstore, coffee shop etc.).
- Tackle vandalism of 2SLGBTQIA+ art installations specifically naming and recording them as hate crimes (there have been a hand full this year).
- Promote public education campaigns for inclusion and acceptance.

#### **5. Wellbeing Barriers:**

- Increase knowledgeable and competent mental health supports for 2SLGBTQIA+ populations.
- Educate on addressing peer pressures and lack of acceptance from families.
- Enhance education for healthcare providers, especially the Branford General Hospital.
- Systematic bias and discrimination are barriers to well-being, so combat them.
- Promote inclusivity and representation of 2SLGBTQIA+ populations within the education sector.

#### **6. Support for 2SLGBTQIA+ Populations with Intersecting Marginalized Identities:**

- Prioritize support for Trans youth, non-binary individuals, 2SLGBTQIA+ people of colour, Indigenous and disabled 2SLGBTQIA+ populations.
- Prioritize support for those who are unlabeled and questioning their identities.
- Extend support for 2SLGBTQIA+ populations living in rural communities.

#### **7. Discussion of Positive Experiences or Ideas:**

- Encourage more community events, family friendly gatherings, and media exposure, i.e. events like movies in Harmony Square.
- Recognize and celebrate supportive businesses, individuals, and initiatives through an awards program.
- Promote visible signs of support, such as rainbow flags and 2SLGBTQIA+ yard signs.

# Closing Remarks:

In closing, we want to express our deepest gratitude for everyone who contributed to the success of this 2SLGBTQIA+ Community Photovoice Art Show and Community Conversation on Safety and Well-being within Brantford and the County of Brant, as well as the artists who took the photos, engaged in critical conversations, and attended the event. Your presence, engagement, and commitment to fostering inclusivity and understanding in the face of adversity has left an indelible mark on our community.

This event emerged from a critical need to address the distressing surge in anti-2SLGBTQIA+ hate, a challenge that our communities face not only locally, but on a broader scale. The disturbing incidents during the anti-2SLGBTQIA+ hate protest highlighted the urgent necessity for open dialogue, understanding and concrete actions to combat bias and discrimination.

Through the powerful medium of art, we sought to amplify the voices of our resilient community members, who, despite facing discrimination, proudly showcased their experiences, challenges, and triumphs. The photo project, with its compelling themes, provided a profound glimpse into the nuanced realities of being 2SLGBTQIA+ in Brantford and the County of Brant, challenging cis-heteronormativity and emphasizing the importance of community, especially during difficult times.

The community conversation that followed was a pivotal moment for collective reflection and action. The insights and recommendations shared by participants underscore the need for dedicated 2SLGBTQIA+ spaces, community support, overcoming barriers, addressing safety concerns, and enhancing the overall well-being of 2SLGBTQIA+ populations locally.

We echo the sentiments of the community, urging for tangible changes, inclusivity, and safety. The call for the establishment of safer spaces, visibility through inclusive initiatives, and the promotion of community support resonates strongly with the shared values of acceptance, love, and understanding that we strive to cultivate.

As we move forward, let this event serve as a catalyst for positive change, a beacon of hope for a future where all members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community feel embraced, supported, and celebrated. Let us carry the momentum generated into our daily lives, workplaces, and institutions, challenging bias, dismantling discrimination, and fostering a community that truly values diversity.

Together we can build a community where every individual is free to express their authentic selves without fear of prejudice and discrimination. Thank you for being a part of this vital conversation, and for contributing to the ongoing journey towards a more inclusive and compassionate Brantford and County of Brant.

Sincerely,  
The Bridge Brant, WorQshop: Building Safer Spaces  
and Dr. Christine Wildman

