

Organizers of Southington Pride week planning events across town

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Southington Community Cultural Arts center is one of several organizations in town planning events to celebrate Pride Week beginning late next month. | Dave Zajac, Record-Journal

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SOUTHINGTON — The committee behind the town’s first organized Pride Week is finalizing a schedule of events to be hosted virtually and at local businesses, churches and civic organizations.

“There is a need for it and a recognition that as a community this is going to be a wonderful event for people to come together,” said Mitchell Oliva, a member of Southington Pride Inc., the organization planning the events for the last week of May and the first week of June.

The dozen or so events are designed to center on and affirm the experiences of Southington residents who make up the town’s LGBTQIA community — an abbreviation encompassing a number of non-heterosexual orientations and gender identities.

A ceremonial flag raising is planned at Town Hall, First Congregational Church will host an educational panel discussion, while a family fun hour will take place at YMCA Camp Sloper. Kinsmen Brewing Company, Plan B restaurant and Foodology cooking school are also planning events.

Though the sort of parade that Pride celebrations across the country are known for won’t be possible due to the coronavirus pandemic, Olivia said in-person events are still feasible in accordance with state Department of Public Health and federal guidelines.

Staff and volunteers at the Southington Community Cultural Arts will be painting a crosswalk in rainbow colors ahead of Pride Week. The art center at 93 Main St. will then host a chalk painting contest outside its doors and a free event where families can create their own artwork.

Executive Director Mary DeCroce hopes participants in those events will then come inside to view an exhibit of LGBTQIA themed artwork by town residents, which will be in place for the month of June. The gallery will also use its eight large front windows to display artwork created by Keith Haring, a gay artist who used his murals and graffiti artwork to promote gay rights, AIDS awareness and racial justice.

Since the artwork will be prominently displayed along one of the town’s busiest thoroughfares, DeCroce said it has the potential to make residents think about the messages of acceptance and understanding every day they pass by.

“Art tells a story, art tells people who we are, what we think and is an expression of our culture and I think it’s important for an arts center like us to put art out in a way that people ... can understand and hopefully better the community,” she said.

Many of the events will have separate portions geared toward adults, youth and families, with the hope of creating spaces where people can freely express themselves, Olivia said. For youth especially, the messages from Pride Week can have a strong impact on children who have all different levels of daily engagement with the LGBTQIA community, including their own identities, family members or by providing a greater understanding of diversity for those without direct connections themselves.

“We know that this is new and that this is going to be a different experience, but I think the biggest thing that we can share is we’re looking forward to a great event that’s going to raise awareness in our community and bring dialogue,” he said.

When the idea of having a Pride Week in Southington was first seriously considered in 2018, organizers hoped to just have a 10-person flag raising ceremony, so to see it grow so much has been humbling for Olivia. He hopes the organization will be able to use the connections it's built with the town, businesses and civic groups to create resources for LGBTQIA individuals in town.

Though Southington Pride Inc. is currently a non-stock corporation, it’s working with the Main Street Community Foundation to be able to accept donations until it can receive its official tax exempt status from the IRS.

Pride Week events will largely be free, though participants are encouraged to donate to local nonprofits like Bread For Life. Southington Pride Inc. recently held a food drive that collected 4,500 pounds of food and over \$900 for the local soup kitchen.

Main Street Community Foundation President Susan Sadecki said she’s glad to see a LGBTQIA-led organization trying to both raise awareness and educate the entire Southington community on the value of equality for a historically marginalized population.

“I think it’s really important that a group like Southington Pride can help raise awareness throughout an entire community,” she said.