



December 6, 2019

Via email to: dpsmith@cabq.gov
Dean Smith
Director
The Public Library Albuquerque
and Bernalillo County
501 Copper Ave. NW
Albuquerque, NM 87102

Via email to: tkeller@cabq.gov
Mayor Tim Keller
City of Albuquerque
1 Civic Plaza, 11th Floor
Albuquerque NM 87102

Re: Feminist objections to Drag Queen Story Hour

Dear Director Smith and Mayor Keller,

We write on behalf of members and supporters who live, work, and attend school in New Mexico, to explain why feminists have raised serious concerns and object to the practice of hosting “Drag Queen Story Hour” or other drag-themed events aimed at children in public libraries. As discussed below, we object to presenting drag acts to children because it is adult entertainment that is sexist, and exposes children to homophobia and an unhealthy image of lesbian, bisexual, and gay people. And, while we understand the role that libraries play in providing free access to books and information and discussion about contentious issues, we believe that Drag Queen Story Hour events are neither intended nor appropriate venues for discussing those issues. For these reasons we urge the Public Library of Albuquerque and Bernalillo County to adopt a policy prohibiting Drag Queen Story Hour events aimed at minors.

Drag is adult entertainment with a heavy dose of sexism.

Drag is adult entertainment, and even when aimed at audiences of children in Drag Queen Story Hour events, drag queens typically display highly sexualized dress and behavior.

This is an example of the kind of sexualized fashion that the Washington, DC chapter of Drag Queen Story Hour deems age-appropriate for attendees, some of whom are toddlers.ⁱ



Here is another example of an outfit that one drag queen deemed appropriate for an event in a King County, WA library that was specifically aimed at teens (though children appearing no older than ten years also attended), complete with a strip tease.ⁱⁱ



From a feminist perspective, the main feature of drag is that it equates “woman” with over-sexualized clothing (outfits no woman would wear to a library), unrealistic fake breasts and body shapes, heavy makeup, frivolous behavior, and a demure voice. This cements sex stereotypes that are offensive and harmful to women and girls. And because the message is largely visual, it takes hold even in preverbal children.

Children are not yet mature enough to parse these types of adult entertainment acts or to analyze them independently. Nor are they encouraged to do so in Drag Queen Story Hour, because the organization presents drag as unequivocally positive and “age appropriate.”ⁱⁱⁱ

There are obvious and simple alternatives for libraries that want to teach children healthy messages about gender-nonconformity. A man should be free to wear any type of dress or skirt that would be appropriate fashion for a library employee or volunteer and read a book to children; a woman should be free to wear slacks and no makeup to read to children. Rather than presenting a cheesy nightclub act, they could talk to children about genuine gender-nonconformity, about their experience of embracing their own bodies and their own fashion preferences. Lesbian, bisexual, and gay volunteers could give talks to teens about how they navigated their same-sex attraction and the normal awkwardness of puberty so they can now live rich and healthy lives. They could teach children that clothing does not make a man or woman, and children are never in the wrong body—truly feminist and progressive messages. Instead, the Drag Queen Story Hours tell children that when men wear dresses and cosmetic-covered faces they’re women.

Drag Queen Story Hour exposes children to homophobia and an unhealthy image of lesbian, bisexual, and gay people.

The explicit aim of Drag Queen Story Hour is to associate drag acts with “LGBTQ people” and to portray drag performers as good “queer role models.”^{iv} For many children, Drag Queen Story Hour is likely to be one of their first exposures to the “LGBTQ” acronym and concept.

This is a serious concern for feminists because drag acts are *not* representative of the diversity of healthy and meaningful cultures and morals developed by lesbian, bisexual, and gay communities. While drag is rooted in gay men’s nightclub culture, many lesbian and bisexual feminists and some gay men have critiqued prominent elements of drag culture as misogynistic and homophobic.^v Drag Queen Story Hours lead children to associate homosexuality or gender non-conformity with over-sexualized, deviant, transgressive, over-the-top behavior. It is a myth that only political conservatives have a moral core and everyone else is a libertine who lacks

inappropriate social boundaries. This is the “queer” stereotype many gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals have worked for decades to dismantle.

Our concern with Drag Queen Story Hour doesn’t end with the events themselves, because the messages conveyed in those events don’t stay in the children’s reading room. Older kids and teens commonly have access to the internet, where they naturally go to learn more about the drag queens who read books at Drag Queen Story Hours. When they do, they may find sites like ABOUT (a “Texas queer” online magazine), where one drag queen who had previously participated in the Drag Queen Story Hour program talked openly about his history of drug abuse and prostitution, and described his ongoing performance of sexualized violence as a “dominatrix” in a positive light, implying that it is an acceptable way to address past trauma.^{vi}

This is not about free speech.

We understand and embrace the role that public libraries have to play in hosting discussions about highly contentious issues. Drag Queen Story Hour is patently controversial, but the purpose of the events is not to discuss the pros and cons of presenting drag acts as children’s entertainment. Instead the program has been allowed to go ahead and do that without discussion. This is a serious omission, especially considering that early exposure to misogynist and over-sexualized displays may affect the mental health of children.

Sincerely,

The Women’s Liberation Front Board of Directors

/s/ Natasha Chart
Natasha Chart, Chair

cc: Albuquerque Bernalillo Library Advisory Board
info@SupportABCLibraries.org
American Library Association
ala@ala.org
Albuquerque City Council:
kensanchez@cabq.gov
ibenton@cabq.gov
kpena@cabq.gov
bwinter@cabq.gov
cynthiaborrego@cabq.gov
patdavis@cabq.gov
dgibson@cabq.gov
trudyjones@cabq.gov
dharris@cabq.gov
Bernalillo County Commission
Commission@bernco.gov

ⁱ The DC Drag Queen Story Hour is held “[i]n partnership with the DC Public Library, which advertises the event on its website. See <https://www.facebook.com/events/519525498811073/>; see also <https://www.dclibrary.org/node/64309>.

ii See https://www.redstate.com/brandon_morse/2019/06/25/two-moms-expose-drag-queen-story-hour-featuring-stripping-drag-queen-forced-police/.

iii See Drag Queen Story Hour FAQ page, above.

iv The Drag Queen Story Hour website's "About" page says that "[Drag Queen Story Hour] captures the imagination and play of the gender fluidity of childhood and gives kids glamorous, positive, and unabashedly queer role models." <https://www.dragqueenstoryhour.org/#about>. Their "FAQ" page further says, "Given that LGBTQ people are present in every community, we believe that children deserve to be exposed to these aspects of our shared history and culture, in age appropriate ways." <https://www.dragqueenstoryhour.org/faq/>

v See Meghan Murphy, "Why has drag escaped critique from feminists and the LGBTQ community?", Feminist Current, April 25, 2014, at: "<https://www.feministcurrent.com/2014/04/25/why-has-drag-escaped-critique-from-feminists-and-the-lgbtq-community/>"; see also Jamie Tabberer, "Gay men like me need to start acknowledging our misogyny problem," Independent, July 27, 2017, at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/gay-men-lgbt-50th-anniversary-misogyny-rupaul-drag-race-fishy-queen-lesbians-a7862516.html>.

vi "What I Learned as a Trans Dominatrix" by Elizabeth Davidson, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190404233344/http://about-online.com/featured/learned-trans-dominatrix-sex-work/>. Incidentally, Davidson was later identified as William Travis Dees, a/k/a "Liza Lott," a/k/a "Elizabeth Anne Davidson," a registered "high-risk" sex offender convicted as a juvenile of indecency with a child under the age of 6. <http://www.abcbusinessnews.com/2019/04/another-drag-queen-story-hour-member-exposed-as-pedophile-investigation-shows/>. That is unfortunately not the sole example of Drag Queen Story Hour drag queens later found to have a history of sexually abusing children. See also Lauren Talarico, "Houston Public Library admits registered child sex offender read to kids in Drag Queen Storytime," KHOU News, March 15, 2019 at: <https://www.khou.com/article/news/local/houston-public-library-admits-registered-child-sex-offender-read-to-kids-in-drag-queen-storytime/285-becf3a0d-56c5-4f3c-96df-add07bbd002a>.