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## LGBTQ: What Does Clonakilty Do?

In today's society, the initialism "LGBTQ+" isn't an unfamiliar term. We hear it on the radio, see it on our television, and we may even know somebody identifying with this group. To many of us, it's become our everyday – plenty are familiar with the topic and are aware of its presence in our lives. However, it's still a subject with ever-growing knowledge, and the more exposure we as people have to it, the more we can do to support our friends and family on this journey of self-identity and promote inclusivity across wider ranges of people. So, how does the town of Clonakilty, Co. Cork help to embrace the LGBTQ community?

Nestled in Deasy's Carpark in Clonakilty lays The Shack, a YMCA Youth Service. Rainbowfolx, a highly inclusive LGBTQ+ youth group, takes place there weekly. It was established in the autumn of 2021, during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, and serves the purpose of providing a safe space to the local LGBTQ community. Every week, members of the local queer youth and others meet here to partake in both socialization and various activities provided by the youth service.

Rainbowfolx was initially founded to provide a space for the local LGBTQ identifying community. Clonakilty had never seen something like this before and needed a space for the queer youth to embrace their way of life. "Many LGBTQ teenagers commonly feel isolated from non-LGBTQ identifying groups," a participant, who would prefer to remain anonymous, stated. Rainbowfolx provides a space for teenagers across a broad range of both gender and sexual identities to come together and express their true selves. Young people now have the opportunity to both socialize with like-minded individuals and partake in the activities provided by The Shack. Luke (they/them), a youth worker for Rainbowfolx, expressed that "we [Rainbowfolx] pride ourselves on our youth participation, and youth leadership." The group strongly believes that youth participation plays a vital role in bringing them together, and often takes ideas from actual participants for group activities, workshops and events that take place at Rainbowfolx to continue improving the services offered.

Although primarily seen as an LGBTQ youth group, The Shack isn't limited to its regular queer space. A number of diverse activities are regularly provided, which

appeal to both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ identifying audiences. Most recently, sexual health & safety workshops, arts and crafts and education on Fairtrade took place, and were thoroughly enjoyed by their participants. Currently, The Shack is offering a Leadership Training course to those who wish to become youth workers in the future.

Rainbowfolx strives to give the youth of Clonakilty a sense of community in their lives. The consensus among attendees of the group is that it is a fantastic way to meet like-minded people and learn more about those around you. Alex (he/they), a regular attendee of the youth group, praised Rainbowfolx for helping him to meet new people and improve both his social and leadership skills. "It feels like a second home," he claimed, adding that many would agree that the youth group truly felt like their safe space. Another participant, who would prefer to remain anonymous, said "the inclusivity offered at Rainbowfolx is incomparable to anything I have ever experienced before." The range of diversity amongst attendees gives the group a greater sense of inclusivity, as participants are encouraged to express their true selves. In short, those who attend have both the opportunity to make new friends and widen their knowledge on LGBTQ topics. This, in turn, helps to promote inclusivity across Clonakilty.

In the words of Elaine Hall, author and founder of The Miracle Project, "inclusion elevates all". Having seen the work carried out by youth services such as Rainbowfolx, it is clear they truly do an amazing job at educating the local community of Clonakilty on LGBTQ identifying people, and in turn offer a safe space to the queer youth. Many are thankful for their presence in the town, and the opportunities they have provided as, without Rainbowfolx, Clonakilty would likely not have an actual space for LGBTQ individuals to meet. The Shack hopes to welcome more of the local youth to participate in their weekly meetings and learn more about those around them.