

Supportive family is key to FHS student's Youth Human Rights Award win

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The Family of 2024 Youth Human Rights Award winner Merrit Johnson. (L-R) Doug Johnson (father), Alisa Weyman (grandmother), Debra Weyman (mother), Merrit, Celia (sister), Karen Weyman (aunt). Johnson was honoured for her advocacy for 2SLGBTQIA+ students.

Fredericton High School senior Merrit Johnson received the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission's Youth Human Rights Award in September in recognition of her passionate advocacy for 2SLGBTQIA+ students.

Johnson, described by Commission Chairwoman Phylomène Zangio as "a natural leader who is already making our province a better place for all," has been a champion for student gender-sexuality issues since she was in Grade 6.



Lt.-Gov. Brenda L. Murphy; Merrit Johnson; Suzanne Chiasson, vice-president of Rendez-vous de la fierté Acadie Love, who also won a Human Rights Award; and New Brunswick Human Rights Commission chairwoman Phylomène Zangio. Johnson was honoured for her advocacy for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Photo Credit: Steve MacGillivray

But according to Johnson, her advocacy could not have been as focused and sincere as it is without one key ingredient: the support and encouragement of her family.



Fredericton High School senior Merrit Johnson, winner of the 2024 New Brunswick Human Rights Commission's Youth Human Rights Award for her advocacy for 2SLGBTQIA+ students.

"A lot of the motivation for the work I do is because I have these wonderful, accepting parents who've been able to support me through school and through whatever issues I'm having with my life," said Johnson. "Having that support at home really allowed me to be more confident when I presented myself to the world, and I just want to create a space to give that to other kids."

Said Johnson's mother, Debra Weyman, "Unconditional parental support provides the foundation for a child to figure out who they are and who they want

to be. If, as parents, we do the work to create a safe, accepting relationship, then the journey towards this will be much easier and the outcome more authentic.”

“The best parents lead by example,” said Johnson’s father, Doug.

That unconditional parental support set Johnson on her path.

As a member of FHS’s Safe Space executive committee, she created 2SLGBTQIA+-inclusive resources and presentations for teachers to use in classes. She also developed an anti-bullying initiative and paired it with information on career planning and personal wellness for students.

“I’ve been bullied a lot over the course of my life, and it’s something that I know how to deal with, and I know how to report it,” Johnson said. “In school, I was coming to learn that a lot of kids don’t have that background knowledge and don’t have that experience.”

So, Johnson and a friend created a presentation that listed resources students could rely on if they were being bullied or harassed. Those resources included lists of teachers to contact for support, and locations of security cameras.

“I had students reaching out to me that they were being bullied but were too scared to talk to their vice-principal, too scared to go alone,” she said. “So I started to contact vice-principals on behalf of students. I would just copy them on an email, and that way the student wasn’t the one reaching out.”

Johnson’s goal is to make the presentation and resources she created with the FHS Safe Space executive committee available to teachers at other schools. “We had a teacher supervisor who supported us and gave us lots of opportunities for learning so we could take our work to the next level.”



New Brunswick Human Rights Commission Chairwoman Phylomène

Zangio. Photo Credit: Steve MacGillivray

“Not only did Merrit formalize Pride Week as an official yearly celebration at Fredericton High School, but she has also connected with FHS administrators to open dialogue around addressing queerphobic bullying in school,” Zangio said. “Merrit has already accomplished so much, and I see a brighter human rights landscape ahead in New Brunswick with her involvement.”

Johnson plans to continue her advocacy for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community when she goes to university next year.

Her parents’ support set her on a path of service.

“I was a very gender non-conforming child, so I don’t think it was a surprise for them whatsoever. And they were just 100% like, ‘how can we support you? How can we give you the best chance to live your life?’”

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