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Entertainment & Life

## Drag show enthusiasts hope to unify Topeka community through performing, acceptance

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For some people, dressing in drag can be an escape of sorts and a transformation into someone new.

For a man, it's about transforming into a woman and creating the illusion they are of the opposite sex for the night.

Amanda Novo — who prefers the gender neutral pronouns they, them and their — grew up dressing as a boy and knew their career was going to center around something that had to do with being a boy.

"I'm non-binary transgender," Novo said. "I have more of a male personality than a female personality. The makeup, the nails — if I was actually born a man, I would be a gay boy. I always played the boy growing up, I never wanted to be the girl."

Amanda Novo gets the opportunity to perform as a diva queen, or bio queen, and along with husband Ty Novo and Kelly Vanderpool helps others live their dream of performing in drag.

Vanderpool and the Novos created "This is M.E.," or "TIME," which organizes drag shows at various venues in Topeka.

The idea for 'This is M.E.' formed in April. Shows are held at Studio 62 in the NOTO Arts and Entertainment District or at Wild Horse Saloon in south Topeka.

Tickets cost \$5, and shows typically last three hours.

Wanting to create drag shows in Topeka began as a conversation between Vanderpool and Ty Novo, who said the Topeka gay community had nothing after Skivies closed.

"Our gay community used to be huge and it was beautiful and great," said Ty Novo, a transgender man. "After they (Skivies) shut down, we started fizzing out."

When Amanda Novo moved to Topeka, they said, they noticed people were traveling to different towns — Lawrence, Wichita and Salina — in order to watch a drag show.

"The only time there was a drag show in Topeka was once a year for Pride," Amanda Novo said. "Every city deserves an LGBTQ- friendly bar, every community deserves that, because there is entertainment out there."

Amanda Novo said the purpose of "This is M.E." is to make people more open-minded again.

But there is more to drag than just putting on makeup and a wig. Amanda Novo said you have to put your heart into it.

"You have to sell the illusion," Ty Novo said.

Each show usually has a different theme, such as Disney night or Halloween.

In November, Studio 62 was packed with people waiting for the drag show to begin.

When the first drag queen performed, she made her way from the back of the room, wearing a long gown and dancing to "This is Me," a song from "The Greatest Showman."

Audience members watched as she performed the song, some even walking up to give her money.

While all three "This is M.E." members have a goal to make Topeka more open-minded and to entertain people with drag, they also have their own separate goals.

Amanda Novo said she wants to increase youth outreach and create a place for kids to come after school to play pool or video games.

Vanderpool said she would like to open a bar someday, although it isn't in the cards right now.

Vanderpool said her favorite part about drag is listening to the different drag queens.

"It's just neat to see everyone come together and help each other," Vanderpool said.

The Novos and Vanderpool hope the drag shows can help unify the Topeka community.

"Whether it be gay, straight, whatever, as long as everyone is happy and having a good time, that's what we want," Vanderpool said. "There is so much crime and hate and murder, and why does it have to be that way? Love is love in our eyes."