

Demonstrating Compassion Gives Hope to Others

By Stephen Ditchburn, Rainbow Elders Calgary

Ten years ago, a 15-year-old gay kid from Ottawa called Jamie Hubley killed himself because he was depressed and being bullied at school. I never met Jamie, and nor did Canadian satirist Rick Mercer, who on his TV show, *The Rick Mercer Report*, spoke of Jamie and how we all had a responsibility to "step up to the plate" and that gay adults especially needed to become role models for kids like Jamie.

When I was in high school, I figured I was the only gay kid in my school. I don't remember any talk, lessons or assemblies about bullying. I never learned about human rights, gay rights, leadership, citizenship and similar issues. There were no Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs), no safe places, no awareness campaigns, no internet. Having struggled through, I realised that Rick was right, I needed to help make it better.

At that time I was teaching with the Calgary Board of Education. I reacted quickly to Rick's words and before I knew it I'd organized powerful anti-bullying and gay-awareness assemblies. And way before they became a hot political issue in Alberta, we had a Gay-Straight Alliance established at my school.

When I was introduced to Rainbow Elders Calgary a year ago, I was very happy to see that one of the group's missions was to connect with youth. We would be role models and hopefully offer inspiration and some form of support for LGBTQ+ youth.

We were invited to a GSA meeting and also organized our own intergenerational events, where there were opportunities to meet and chat. What rewarding experiences. Imagine, 14-year-olds chatting with us old folk! So many stories to listen to and share.

The youth we met with were so very inspiring and eye-opening. Some were very proud and positive of who they are. They credited GSAs for giving them opportunity, strength and allies. These amazing young adults were very much aware of their rights and were especially concerned and worried about the possible disappearance of GSAs in their schools. Some young adults were still afraid about coming out. Would they be shunned, ostracized or rejected by their family and so-called friends?

It's difficult to find accurate statistics regarding gay youth suicide in Canada, but whether it's one or 300 a year, as Rick says, it's too many. Despite all of the technology and resources, programs and events, despite the positive pro-gay messages and the abundance of gay characters on television, it's still a scary world out there for LGBTQ+ people.

Being gay or talking about it is no longer taboo, but coming out can still be terrifying. As part of Rainbow Elders Calgary, we are learning so much about the issues facing today's LGBTQ+ young adults.

Sometimes, you never really know if you've made a difference in someone's life, but I know we have touched upon the lives of many young people by demonstrating compassion, giving hope and the message that it does get better.