

Reflections and Celebrations of a Rainbow Year

Stephen Ditchburn, Rainbow Elders Calgary

Back in the fifties, Everett Klippert was a bus driver in Calgary. I can picture him navigating the narrow streets and avenues of our city and getting folk where they wanted to be during blizzards, thunderstorms, hot summer days and frigid winter ones as well. He passed away in 1996, aged 70, and I imagine he would probably be surprised that people would be talking about him all these years later in 2019.

You see, in 1965 Klippert was the last person in Canada sent to jail for being gay. His controversial case ultimately resulted in the Canadian government, with Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1969 legalizing homosexuality. It took a while, but in 2017 Trudeau's son, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized in parliament to the nation's LGBTQ community for how it had been treated.

There has been much talk in 2019 regarding the rise of gay rights, for 50 years ago in NYC the Stonewall riots happened and are considered to be a monumental event in the history of LGBTQ rights. In commemorating and remembering these and other events everyone has been reminded of just how far we have come as a free society and how important we consider human rights to be.

It's taken a long time but things really have changed. Whoever would have imagined that one day here in Calgary we would have a pride stripes painted in the heart of our city on Stephen Avenue? On top of that pride flags now fly in front of McDougal Centre and City Hall as they have done for several years during Calgary Pride week. And knock me down with a feather! This year, our government released an equality loonie honouring the 50th anniversary of the decriminalization of homosexuality in Canada.

When I attended my first pride parade way back when, no one ever dreamed that it would evolve to be an huge celebration and extravaganza with over 175 entries and thousands of participants with thousands and thousands of spectators! If you've never attended, mark your calendar for next year's festival on Sunday, September 6. It's amazing and lots of fun.

We may have come a long way, however the work continues. I am a member of Rainbow Elders Calgary, a passionate group of LGBTQ+ senior folk that has been making a difference in our city. We are working hard to increase the awareness of important issues that older LGBTQ+ people face. Rainbow Elders Calgary's work this year included an working with the Sharpe Foundation and Mount Royal University in a community-led project: Housing and Supporting Need for Aging in the LGBTQ+ Community. The study suggests seniors across the city are worried about being an open member of the gay community if they have to move to a long-term or assisted-living facility.

As advocates for LGBTQ+ seniors we organized several social events for LGBTQ+ seniors, friends and allies. These where can come together in a safe, fun environment. Many gay seniors find themselves isolated and lonely so we were happy to create a safe environments where everyone could mingle, celebrate and even dance.

This year we were invited to give several presentations at various events where we advocate for LGBTQ+ seniors and highlight some of the work we have done with LGBTQ+ youth. We feel that working with young adults is truly important as we are role models and hopefully offer some inspiration. Our work with youth involves organizing intergenerational get-togethers, meeting Gay Straight Alliance students and attending an afternoon at Camp fYrefly, personal learning weekend

for LGBTQ+ youth held in beautiful Kananaskis country. Here ten of us Rainbow Elders chatted with young people from all over Alberta, speaking of our experiences and journey and listening to theirs. It was a remarkable experience.

Growing up gay, most of us have been bullied, picked on and ostracized over the years. Although much has changed in respect to human and gay rights, being gay is still not easy at any age. We know that young people need alliances and positive role models. This is one of the reasons that we were thrilled to be marching in the Calgary Pride parade. Most of us never imagined that anything like this would ever happen. Our participation, and that of everyone else in the parade, sends clear and positive messages such as: being gay is okay; be proud of who you are and it doesn't matter who you love because love is love. Let's all remember that as we head into 2020.

Rainbow Elders Calgary is a passionate group of volunteers who work to promote awareness of the issues and concerns of LGBTQ+ seniors. Visit us at www.rainbowelderscalgary.ca or email: rainbowelderscalgary@gmail.com.