

A Very Grand Affair

by Stephen Ditchburn, Rainbow Elders Calgary

It was a remarkable moment in my life when I recently opened my email and saw the subject line: *Will You be my date? Me? Little ol' me?* Then I was extra flattered as it was from Lois Szabo! What an honour!

You see, Lois is very highly respected and well-known in Calgary's gay community. In 1964, when homosexuality was illegal in Canada, she came out to her husband and family. Can you imagine what a huge step that was for anyone back then? Even today, coming out remains a frightening moment for many gay people, young and old. Lois, however, went on to be one of the co-founders of Club Carousel, Calgary's first gay club, which was down in the basement at 1207 1st St SW. This was a remarkable event in Calgary's gay history. The Club lasted for almost ten years and Lois, now 83, is the last surviving co-founder. She remains a very active member of Calgary's gay family and in recognition of everything she'd done for gay rights over the decades, she was chosen to be Grand Marshall in Calgary's Pride Parade in 2017!

Our date was to be A Very Grand Affair held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel on a Saturday night. Because of her celebrity status in Gay Calgary, Lois had received a couple of free tickets to ReProm 2020. The concept of the evening was wonderful! Since many gays never had a chance to go to their high school graduation dance with someone of the same sex, this ReProm was an opportunity to make up that. It was a chance for LGBTQ+ folk and their allies to celebrate, dance and be themselves.

There was over 250 people in attendance but this was to be expected because it was also a fundraiser for Calgary's Centre for Sexuality, an amazing organization that provides all sorts of assistance and programs dealing with sexual issues to everyone. There was silent auction, a fun photo booth and lots of spots to meet and chat. The champagne and wine were flowing! Yummy food was served and with the live music being so much fun, even I was dancing! It was a very special evening of smiles and celebration.

There were TV cameras and reporters every where. Reading some of the coverage the next day on CBC it was inspiring to read about their happiness thanks to this ReProm. How great it was that everyone was able to express who they really are and celebrate together.

Lois thought it was "a fantastic, well-planned evening." She has a very infectious smile and wore it all evening, beaming like crazy. She never had a chance to complete high school, let alone celebrate graduation. She'd also told me I didn't need to get her a corsage for our rendez-vous but she got one anyway, one with a pride ribbon and a rose.

One cool thing about our gay community is that if you're involved in anyway in any LGBTQ+ events, chances are you'll see someone you know at other LGBTQ+ events. Since Lois is a legend, no matter where I go with her there are friends and folk who want to say "hi" and this night was no different. There were hugs, smiles and laughs all evening long, for, after all, this was A Very Grand (Gay!) Affair.

I barely remember going to my own high school grad. Reflecting back, I think I had a good time, but maybe not the time that I've remembered and treasured. Our graduating class at Lord Beaverbrook High School was huge and we never had a banquet most probably because there was no place in the city at that time to accommodate us all. I do remember dinner at the Moose Factory (I loved that place!) and a dance in the fancy ballroom at the Palliser Hotel, but I can't hardly recall anyone I went with. I do know that my date was someone of the wrong sex as I wasn't able to celebrate with the guy I truly wanted to be with.

Sadly, these days it's still somewhat of a taboo to attend graduation with a member of the same sex. The bullying continues everywhere and is made even worse with social media and cyber-bullying where evil cowards can hide and harass at will. Despite the many changes that have occurred regarding human and gay rights, it still takes a very brave and confident soul to attend high school grad with a same-sex date.

As Lois always reminds us, we must never give up to fight. Today in many parts of the world being gay is like being sentenced to death. Some places have even labelled themselves as gay-free zones. Despite all the awareness campaigns, gay people of all ages in our city continued to be threaten, bullied and ostracised.

However, on that evening in February we were all swept away, celebrating and having fun with our tribe. This was a time to forget for a moment the world's craziness and troubles for at least a short while.

Indeed, this powerful evening of ReProm was certainly for me and many others A Very Grand Affair. I'll never forget iteven if I didn't go with a boy. Maybe next time?

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.