

It's About Rights. Human Rights

By Stephen Ditchburn, Rainbow Elders Calgary

Tomas Jirousek is a student of law at the University of Toronto and after reading one of his columns in the *Calgary Herald* I was very inspired to write about him.

I will be forever shaped by the mutual experience of being both gay and Indigenous, he wrote. Wow! Gay and Indigenous. I can only image the bullying, bigotry and hatred he has faced and somehow managed to overcome.

Tomas is a member of the Blackfoot Confederacy and graduated from McGill University this past spring. His article reminded me about the concept of allyship and how important it is to support others as they fight for their human rights.

Rainbow Elders Calgary is a support group for senior members of our LGBTQ+ community, identifying issues and concerns gay seniors face. As seniors we recognize that the struggle for basic LGBTQ+ right has been a long struggle, but the progress (at least here in Canada) has been remarkable, especially in the last 15-20 years.

Still, many people continue to deny gay people their rights and express that through violence and unacceptable behaviour. In Calgary this summer, several incidents of hatred come to mind. In one, a gay couple was assaulted in Kensington by two men who used rock, a belt and even a blue recycling bin as weapons! Other incidents include people spitting on members of the gay community and vandalizing gay pride flags.

Hatred seems to be rampant these days. In response to another case which involved death threats and hate towards the folk at Pink Flamingo, a Calgary community group who proposed to create a series of Black Lives Matter murals Mayor Naheed Nenshi said, "I couldn't care less what you think about that mural, you have no right, no right whatsoever on this city to engage in that kind of threatening behaviour. And if that's how you feel, find another place to live."

As a young immigrant from England I was picked on and ridiculed at school for my English accent. Perhaps no one meant any harm, but it still hurt me and made me feel uncomfortable. (Now that I think of it, I wonder if the bullies were actually jealous that I spoke so beautifully!) And as for being gay - well, where do I begin? When I first started teaching for the Calgary Board of Education one of my painful memories was the from the teacher across the hallway who would poke his head into my classroom full of kids and in a hurtful English accent with a feminine wave simply say "hello." I regret not challenging him, but as a newbie I was scared to rock any boats and cause any problems. I felt powerless and didn't know what to do about it other than cringe and endure. Hopefully Mr N. is reading this now and is haunted by his bullying.

It seems like we are all part or have been part of a minority group at one time or another and perhaps even experienced bullying, taunting and ridicule (or even worse) because of being who you are. Perhaps you were too smart in school, or were considered the classroom dummy, or you were too rich with fancy clothes or poor. Maybe you have a different skin colour or wore different clothes than everyone else. Perhaps you were hassled at work or paid less than others because of your sex. Perhaps now, you are a member of the +55 group who feels powerless and ignored, pushed aside in the store or, heaven forbid, suffers from neglect and emotional abuse. Perhaps you know people or have family members or face abuse and bullying for one reason or another.

This is where the concept of allyship fits in. People deserve to live a dignified life. The folks involved in the Black Lives Matter movement in Canada are simply raising awareness to the bigotry, hatred and struggles that Black people face in our communities. And, as Lady Gaga reminds us,

No matter gay, straight, or bi
Lesbian, transgendered life
I'm on the right track baby
I was born to survive
No matter black, white or beige

Chola or orient made
I'm on the right track baby
I was born to be brave

Same DNA, but born this way

So it's really all about rights - our human rights and how we need to remind ourselves and others that we have all faced challenges and difficulties because of who we are.

And as for Mr. Jirousek, I wish you much happiness and every success in the world. I hope our paths one day cross.