

Our Role as Role Models

Stephen Ditchburn, Rainbow Elders Calgary

The importance of seniors being role models for young adults was brilliantly illustrated the other day when three of us from Rainbow Elders Calgary spent an inspiring lunch hour with members of the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) at a Calgary high school.

Apart from being a support group and advocate for LGBTQ seniors, connecting with youth is another of the *raison d'être* of the Rainbow Elders. And so we were very happy to receive an email from a student who had seen us at the GSA conference at Nelson Mandela High School last autumn. We were invited to visit the school's GSA during one of their Wednesday lunch hour meetings.

We were very warmly received and although the students were somewhat shy, it didn't really matter. The eyes and expression of their faces made us feel very welcome and the fact that we were there clearly truly appreciated. It may seem silly, but I wondered how many of them had ever met a gay adult?

In the gay community we often talk about our "chosen family" or our "tribe." These students and their amazing teacher-advisors certainly had a caring family in that room. How very lucky they are; I know of young people, in smaller schools in rural areas, who don't have access to this kind of support.

Every week at this GSA members bring important topics and issues for discussion. Today, Lois, our 83 year-old gay-pioneer and local celebrity spoke of the fact that it's not to be assumed that the fight is over and future is in their hands and none of us should take anything for granted. It's been a long, long journey for gay and human rights to get to where they are now.

The importance of the GSA was clearly evident when some students confided that, sadly, for one reason or another, they were not out at home. Here however was a place where they were respected, welcome and safe.

It was surprising to see only one young man in the group - where were the rest of the guys? Perhaps they weren't comfortable attending the GSA even though Gay-Straight Alliances are not clubs for gay people only. After all, as the name says, it's an alliance between gay and straight people and other allies. It would not be correct to assume that everyone in the GSA is gay. I think perhaps any curious, confused or conflicted guys in the school are too timid about being seen in a club due to the possible stigma. It makes me wonder: How can a GSA reach out to those others, male or female, who are too confused, too scared or too shy to take advantage of this amazing support group?

Gay or straight, can't we all be inspiring role models? I don't mean we have to go on and on about how lucky the young 'uns of today are and how absolutely awful things used to be. How cold it was in those days! We had to walk uphill to school, in a blizzard, and uphill yet again to get home. Instead, each of us have important life stories and experiences to share. We have gone through (and survived!) all sorts of hard times and difficulties. We've felt lonely and confused but also happy and confident. The challenges we've overcome have led us to be "experience wise." We can demonstrate that things get better and that being treated with dignity and compassion is expected.

The following day I met my buddy Steve for an adult pop and told him about the visit to the GSA. Ages ago, Steve married and had kids and basically did what everyone else did in those days. "Well," said Steve. "My life would have turned out differently if there had been a GSA in my high school."

I thought to myself: *well, ain't that the truth?*