



Telling the Story of LGBTQ2S+ Connections Across Generations



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EDMONTON PRIDE SENIORS GROUP






Imagine this: you begin fighting for gay rights at a time when the core of your personal identity is against the law. You live through the AIDS crisis, even as you lose friends to it. Slowly you start to win, first legal battles and then social understanding and acceptance.

Your generation transforms Canada.





They are more active, more creative, and more adventurous than any group of people who have come before them.



A concept that might have seemed unimaginable in your teens and twenties — same-sex marriage — is legal. Homophobia remains, but it's as socially unacceptable as any other form of bigotry and hatred.

And then, as you enter your senior years, you're hit with a new fear, a reality: that in your seniors home or long-term care facility you could be forced back into the closet.

"When I was young, discrimination was about housing and unemployment," says Michael Phair, a former city councillor and one of Edmonton's most active and beloved leaders. "In the '60s and '70s, we

came of age so carefully and discreetly. It began to change in the '80s, but even then the community is so focused on youth culture you don't imagine yourself growing old. For lots of reasons, in the early '80s, I never thought I'd live this long."

The baby boomer generation changes everything. As they enter their senior years they're changing retirement too. They are more active, more creative, and more adventurous than any group of people who have come before them.

What they share with every other generation of seniors is vulnerability.

“None of us want to go back in the closet,” says Thais McKee, an Edmonton financial planner. “We have to make sure we have options available, so we can maintain our freedom, our families, our partners, our rights. We’re not all in the position to choose where we go. The idea of losing our lifestyle when our health fails us was a driving motivation. We’re not hearing good things. What can we do about this?”

“Many of the people who are seniors today grew up when homosexuality was against the law, when it was a mental disorder. We worked so hard to come out, in an intimidating climate, as a minority, as vulnerable people. Doing that over again is not an exciting prospect as we age.”

Phair, McKee, and others formed an informal group and met at Sage Seniors Association. They had heard rumours of mistreatment and intolerance at long-term care facilities, but they needed evidence. They talked about educating each other and the broader community, about protecting vulnerable seniors who were in or out of the closet. They talked about working with staff and leaders at seniors’ homes and organizations, at care facilities, especially faith-based organizations. They had experience as advocates, but never quite like this.





Simone
she/her

Trevor



It couldn't simply be top-down, a political directive from on high. Too many seniors are isolated, and too many negative experiences happen behind closed doors. Too many lack the tools to advocate for themselves and each other.

Then they realized there was an example of a bottom-up way to bring people together to discuss LGBTQ2S+ issues in a respectful but forceful way: Gay-Straight Alliances in Alberta public schools.

"It's all about safe and welcoming environments," says Phair. "But we wanted to do more than follow the GSA strategy. This was an opportunity for seniors to learn from organized youth, and for youth to learn from us as well: tactics and activism, of course, but also the harder work of inviting people in. Kids are still in the closet. Well, so are seniors. How can we advocate for them? Give them a voice?"

The Edmonton Pride Seniors Group reached out to the Alberta GSA Network about an intergenerational dialogue. Twelve older Edmontonians and eleven younger Edmontonians came together in a church basement to explore the differences and similarities across age groups, and to seek ways to learn from one another — as advocates, but more importantly as human beings.

"I live near the church, so that made it an easy decision," said Sophie Pyo, 22, who participated in the facilitated conversations. "Honestly, I didn't know what to expect. I don't get many opportunities to talk to older people, let alone LGBTQ2S+ older people. So I was curious, for sure. And both surprised and not surprised."



"It's all about safe and welcoming environments"



Pyo was not surprised to hear that seniors in Edmonton had experienced difficulties and discrimination, with friends and family and with the broader community. The younger people in the group, she said, spoke of their own challenges. "It was the same but different," she says. "Different eras have different problems, even different vocabularies, but it all goes back to discrimination."

The most memorable conversation, Pyo says, made her see her own life in a new context. "The seniors spoke of going to friends' funerals where the family members, who planned and ran the services, did not

acknowledge their same-sex partners. They just erased that part of the person's life. I'll never forget it."

If there was any tension between the two groups, Pyo says, it was in the realm of frontiers. Some of the seniors spoke of fighting for the changes that young LGBTQ2S+ people enjoy today. Young people did acknowledge this, but they did not want to see any of their own challenges diminished, as though it were easy today.

Yet the seniors and the young people were more similar than anyone had predicted. One of the young people and one of the older



...when can we meet again and who else should we invite?

people, completely unplanned, looked as though they had coordinated their outfits — right down to the identical pride flag belt.

“What’s going on in seniors homes, with people being forced back into closets, and what could happen even more, we can work with each other on this,” says Pyo, who has worked with GSAs as an administrator and an organizer. “We can use similar strategies. The movement could really gain traction.”

They did not come up with a tactical plan by the end of their first meeting, but they knew they were not their own audience. They wanted to reach and somehow protect

seniors and young people who would never meet in a church basement and speak openly about their sexuality. They wanted to influence both management and front-line workers in care facilities. They wanted all Edmontonians to understand how important it is to feel accepted as who we are.

At the end of the first meeting, the first questions were the easiest to answer: when can we meet again and who else should we invite?

For more information on
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