

# The rewards of my involvement in the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement

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My contribution to the gay and lesbian rights movement in Canada has only been a modest one, but it has enriched my life immeasurably. Without it, I suspect, my growth as a human being would have been much diminished. For the gay and lesbian rights movement is above all a humanistic movement.

By "humanistic" I do not mean anything like the religious right would have it signify: anti-Christian, anti-values, anti-family, and so forth. No, I mean something in the spirit of the often quoted saying of the ancient Roman dramatist Terence: "I am human being, and I consider nothing that is human alien to me"; that is, an openness to and a respect for all humanity, both on the individual and collective level; and a refusal to let one's stance in life be ruled by any form of dogmatism, ideologism, tribalism, parochialism, or any other 'ism.'

My involvement in the gay and lesbian rights movement began in the year I came out as a

a need for a community-wide association for lesbian women and gay men.

We established a steering committee for what became the Community Homophile Association of Toronto (CHAT), and our newly fledged organization had its first meeting in January 1971 in the Anglican Church of the Holy Trinity in downtown Toronto. I'll never forget how electric with excitement those early meetings were; for the vast majority of people—and I am sure those early meetings attracted many hundreds of different persons—going to CHAT meetings was an integral part, indeed the most important part of their coming out.

Those early meetings often consisted of little more than group sessions, in which we had the opportunity to pour our feelings, our fears, and our hopes in

lesbian relationships as qualifying for the same employee fringe benefits as heterosexual married couples.

Acadia, I am happy to note, was the second university (next to York University) in Canada, to take this progressive step. In general, Acadia has come a long way in its recognition of the rights, needs, and sensitivities of lesbian women, gay men, and bisexual persons.

In 1978 homosexuality and being gay, lesbian and bisexual were still, I had a good reason to believe at that time, things "not fit to be mentioned among Christians" (to echo the telling phrase in the English anti-sodomy laws a few centuries ago), at least not in public; now, there is, among others, a small but vigorous bisexual, lesbian and gay student presence on this campus, and the Bisexual,

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gay man, i.e., when for the first time I honestly and fully recognized myself as to who I was in terms of my sexual orientation and shared this newly formed insight with a few close friends and some members of my family.

Let me note here that "coming out" can be, for various reasons, a drawn-out process, especially in a family and social context, and should be governed by one's good judgment and a sense of appropriateness. For instance, it was not really until well into the 80's that my entire family knew fully about my sexual orientation and the nature of my relationship with my partner, although in retrospect, now I wish I had done a few things differently.

The year of my coming out was 1970. I was a graduate student then at the University of Toronto, where the University of Toronto Homophile Association (yes, "homophile" was for a while the favored word) had been founded a year earlier—the same year that homosexual acts between consenting adults had been decriminalized in Canada. I attended a number of meetings of the UTHA in the Fall of 1970 and soon put my head together with a number of other persons, both men and women, who frequented and enjoyed UTHA meetings, but felt that there was

uninhibited fashion to our fellow participants. It was immensely therapeutic. What also strikes me in retrospect was the great diversity of persons who attended, men and women, young and old, white and non-white, left-wing (including the politically and socially very radical) and those sometimes well to the right of center, Christian, Jewish, and nonreligious, intellectuals, really middle-class respectable types, highly artistic persons, and people with what one might call blue-collar tastes—an immense and wonderfully diverse cross-section of humanity.

CHAT disbanded in the later 1970s, its function taken over by a large variety of special-purpose groups and associations. But I will always feel privileged to have participated in this pioneering gay and lesbian organization in our country.

During my 18 years at Acadia, my contribution to the gay and lesbian rights movement has been more modest. More of my energy, perhaps, has gone into my scholarship on the subject of gender and sexuality in the ancient Greco-Roman world. However, I am pleased that in the mid-80's I, together with Matt Hughes of the School of Music, was instrumental in getting the University (after some resistance) to recognize long-term gay and

Lesbian and Gay SPLASH has become an annual event in *the athenaeum*. I salute all those students, both women and men, who have made such an important contribution to the creation of a humane, truly liberal learning and social environment at Acadia.

However, I do not wish to suggest any complacency on my part, not at Acadia or anywhere else. It is shocking that in 1994, in a report of Amnesty International, Breaking the Silence, details of the gross violations of the human rights of gay men, lesbian women, and bisexual persons that still take place in a large number of countries.

One tactic often used by the religious right is to stigmatize the gay and lesbian rights movement as a "special interest" group, the promotion of whose cause will undermine the family, and morality and society in general.

As I have already suggested earlier, the interests of the gay and lesbian rights movement and of the proud, self-affirming lesbian women and gay men who are making constructive contributions to Canadian society and culture are profoundly humanistic. I am very grateful for the opportunities I have received to help translate, in my own modest way, that humanistic vision into reality.