

Pflag Sackville, NB, March 24, 2014-03-19 Gerard Veldhoven

As some of you know, I relocated to New Glasgow 2 years ago, a great town and a very open community that is very welcoming.

I became involved with a few activities and I keep myself well-occupied.

In July 2012 I was in a place called the Baked Café, a rather nice place that serves lunches, deserts to die for and a very friendly atmosphere.

I notice a rather large sign that announced a Pride Party 2012 to be held on Thursday. I was told that Pictou County was VERY conservative in many ways, so this surprised me. Well with Peter MacKay as its favourite son, what can I say?

I figured this was some kind of joke, but no, it was a party planned for the LGBT community. I made my way there and the place was filled with about 30 young people and a few older fogies like me.

They invited me to sit with them. I felt like a chaperone because at most get-togethers I seem to be the granddaddy. It was fun.

The next morning I decided to write a letter to the Editor of The News and explain how excited I was to have experienced this in New Glasgow.

The letter did not appear and I thought well, I will email the editor and see why it was not printed. I said, "perhaps the letter was too lengthy, the content inappropriate, or maybe there is a little bit of homophobia in your office".

Within 15 minutes I received an email asking me to meet with the Editor. Not a problem. I walked into his office with a great handshake and soon we sat down to a wonderful conversation.

He told me that he knew a lot about my activism and would I be interested in a weekly column in the paper. Of course, I jumped at the chance. He said the letter would appear the next day.

Then of course I thought a weekly column is a lot of work and where would I get all the ideas from to fill the space. I almost declined the invite knowing full well the work involved. As it turns out it is not difficult at all.

I thanked him very much for the opportunity and now 90 columns later I am still coming up with ideas.

The feedback has so far been extremely positive. I run into people on the street, in the mall, grocery shopping and so on. They urge me to continue as they tell me my articles are very interesting and educational.

The purpose of my column, which goes under the title "Refocus", is to use it as an educational tool.

It's my hope that this effort will raise awareness wherever this column appears

It is so important to get people talking about LGBT issues and promote discussions.

What happened to Scott Jones in New Glasgow for example...they know he was attacked, but why.

I wrote about why he was attacked and that it was a hate crime. Shane Matheson was after Scott because he is gay. Many do not get that....they simply do not understand.

That's why I sincerely hope that this column will give some understanding and educate.

I write about injustices, discrimination and homophobia that are blatantly displayed at universities such as Crandall University in Moncton and Trinity Western University in British Columbia and in religious private schools where gay/straight alliances are barred.

In Ontario the Catholic School Board receives 60 of its funding from the Ontario Government and yet is allowed to bar gay/straight alliance groups. Toronto's Cardinal Collins told the government that the Catholic Church will deal with homosexuality in its own way.

This issue is still unresolved.

A young 16 year old gay High School student in Southern Manitoba was denied permission to set up a gay/straight alliance at his Christian based school.

I write about everyday occurrences we read and hear about on the streets of our nation, in our schools and in our homes.

About the lack of backbone that our politicians display, especially the Harper Conservatives in how they react to the atrocities in Russia, Kenya, Uganda, Saudi Arabia and others where Anti-Homosexuality Bills are legislated with horrendous consequences. John Baird is the only Minister in that government who speaks up for the LGBT community in other countries.

I write about Pope Francis who declared, “Who am I to Judge”, in response to a question what he thinks about gay priests. A few minutes later he said that gays should refrain from going public.

We have also been told that Catholic Doctrine will not change in regard to women priests, married priests and homosexuality.

I relate how people such as American anti-gay crusader Scott Lively, stir the pot and convince others to form anti-gay groups. He travels all over the world to get his horrendous ideas to take hold.

Lively suggested the Rainbow Flag should be returned to the Christian community because “the rainbow belongs to God”.

There are so many stories and a great amount of angst within the LGBT community world-wide.

The number of attacks on gay men has doubled during the past 2 years, suicides among gay and trans teens has increased. This is in Canada where we have equal rights in our constitution and protected under the Human Rights Act. Equal treatment is not a reality in many cases.

These are the sort of things I write about in my columns. At times I do find some happy moments to dwell on such as, more countries and states that allow equal marriage.

We all know of LGBT folks who are happy in their lives, alone or with their families and friends.

Same-sex families who find out that “love is all it takes to make a family”. So many positives that I like to write about and such stories we do not learn about in news items through the media.

The recent story about the Iranian gay couple who came to Halifax sponsored by the Nova Scotia Rainbow Committee is a heart-warming story. When I met these men their faces were aglow with happiness.

They said their lives were at stake if they had stayed in Iran. They now live in Halifax.

I spoke with Scott Jones a few weeks ago and his outlook on life is truly amazing and his slogan, “Don’t be afraid” has a lot of impact.

Scott is a very brave young man and insists we must love his attacker Shane Matheson because he is a human being. These are the kind of stories that affect us in a positive way.

Matheson pleaded guilty to attempted murder and will be sentenced June 12th.

There is lots to write about and much to discuss. I have experienced many changes during my 73 years and though I will not see a world where our brothers and sisters may exist in total peace, live with dignity and contentment, I will continue to educate and raise issues that must be addressed.

My column is my way to contribute in whatever way I am able. I cherish the work I do and with other activities such as the Pictou County Rainbow Community, Race Relations and Anti Discrimination Committee in the Town of New Glasgow, speaking engagements, such as addressing homophobia in Canada at Cape Breton University and as LGBT consultant with the Family Services of Eastern Nova Scotia, I am able to raise awareness and push for the recognition of diversity.

I serve as a volunteer board member for the Pictou County Centre for Sexual Health and as a consequence I am able to speak to gay/straight alliance groups at North Nova High School and recently I spoke to grade 7 & 8 students about homophobia issues.

Last year I was able to get together with New Glasgow officials and we agreed to hold the first Pride Week celebrations in Pictou County.

I was totally amazed that over 200 people showed up at the flag raising ceremony. We had various activities throughout the week and I must say attendance was high considering this was the first such event in that area.

The town CAO, Lisa MacDonald told me that this flag raising had the largest attendance of any in New Glasgow's history, including Canada day celebrations.

There are 4 towns that all border each other....New Glasgow, Stellarton, Westville and Trenton with a population of 35,000 people and that gives me a substantial readership.

So, with all these activities I keep my time well occupied. My column is published weekly in the New Glasgow paper The News, the Amherst

News, five newspapers in Newfoundland and tonight I am able to report the Sackville Tribune Post will also publish it beginning this Wednesday.

Refocus provides me a platform that reaches many and it is my sincere hope that it demonstrates the need to work towards acceptance of members of the LGBT community.

We all must work to make certain that we are all the same somehow, but that each of us is unique in our own special way. We all deserve to be viewed equally under the law and be treated with respect, dignity and to live in peace.

This is also the only LGBT column in Atlantic Canada in mainstream newspapers and I believe the only one in Canada.