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Gay rights advocate set an example simply by being who he was

He and his partner were first to throw a gay wedding in Atlantic Canada after the law was changed

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Some people change the world by making grand gestures and travelling great distances. Others, like Norman Carter, stick close to home and help change things by being fearless enough to just be themselves.

To illustrate just how profound certain changes were in Mr. Carter's lifetime, it is useful to note that in 1957, when he married Arlene Maynard in Truro, N.S., homosexuality was against the law in Canada (as it would be until 1969).

By the time Mr. Carter married Gerard Veldhoven in 2004 - in what would be the first public wedding of a same-sex couple in Atlantic Canada - he had lived openly in a gay relationship in Amherst, N.S., for more than 30 years, raised two daughters from his first marriage, become a second father to Mr. Veldhoven's two sons, co-founded a gay pride group, helped to promote equal rights for gays and supported the fight to have his relationship sanctioned by the state.

"Here were two men who, in the '70s and '80s in a small town, didn't deny who they were," said Mr. Veldhoven's son Chris, now a gay-rights activist himself. "They were open and welcoming and community-minded, and in a town of 10,000 people, that took courage.

"There was no denying who they were as a couple and they never shied away from that."

Norman Anthony Carter was born in Amherst on Jan. 16, 1937. His father, Clairmont, was a mechanic; his mother, Edna, was a pastry chef at the Fort Cumberland Hotel. After graduating from Amherst Regional High, he went to work for Capitol Theatres, managing movie theatres in Charlottetown and then in Truro.

He and his first wife had daughters Cindy-Ann and Laurel-Lee. But the traditional family model didn't work - because Mr. Carter was gay. When the divorce came in the mid-1960s, it was hard and painful.

"Sort of like back to the *Brokeback Mountain* days," Mr. Veldhoven says now.

But as hard as it was to come out publicly as a gay man at that place and time, Mr. Carter stepped immediately into another non-traditional role. He took custody of his daughters and moved into an apartment in his parents' home in Amherst to raise them, working first at Canadian Tire and then as assistant manager at the Cumberland Hotel.

"We lived up over my grandmother, but my Dad was responsible; he brought us up," said his daughter Cindy McKillop, now 50 and living in Morinville, Alta.

In 1974, her father met Mr. Veldhoven, a teacher at the Amherst School for the Deaf. Like Mr. Carter, he had struggled to make a conventional marriage work, then had to admit that it did not. A year later, the two men moved in together, becoming the first gay couple to live openly in the region.

"Of course we knew we were being talked about," Mr. Veldhoven said. "But there were never any overt repercussions, no anti-gay remarks made. I thought it was pretty well-accepted under the circumstances. The fact that this was quite a conservative area makes it all the more remarkable."

In 1977, they started Carvel Upholstery and Draperies, which made their living and allowed Mr. Carter to indulge one of his passions - he loved to fix up old furniture, especially antiques.

Family members came around to the idea of "the two Dads" in their own way and at their own pace. For Cindy, having "Dad No. 1 and Dad No. 2" was never much of an issue.

"I met Gerard when I was 15," she said. "He was very personable and seemed to fit right in. He just stepped right in to the family unit. They approached things in the right way in this respect."

For her sister it was harder, she said, but Laurel eventually came around.

Mr. Veldhoven's sons, who went back to Yarmouth, N.S., with their mother, also had their own ways of dealing with suddenly finding themselves in a non-traditional family. For Chris, as for Cindy, the arrangement seemed natural. For Mark, Mr. Veldhoven's younger son, it took more time.

"When we visited," Chris said, there were all sorts of interesting people around. It opened our minds about people who were different. It dispelled a lot of the myths."

Through it all, "we were a family," Mr. Veldhoven said. "Even though my sons weren't living with us, we were a family."

Mr. Carter's domain was the kitchen, wherein he was affectionately known as "Norma Jean the kitchen queen."

He loved to put on spreads for family holidays and for entertaining friends. Cindy remembers his great soups, how he could look in the fridge and come up with an unscripted masterpiece. Chris remembers great hors d'oeuvres and *oly bolen*, a traditional Dutch New Year's doughnut made in honour of Mr. Veldhoven's Dutch roots.

Most of all they remember warmth and acceptance. "We learned that people are people and love is love," Chris said.

Mr. Carter and Mr. Veldhoven started the Cumberland (County) Pride Group, and went out of their way to make their home a place where people of all sexual orientations could feel comfortable being themselves.

Chris said the two Dads gave him the confidence to accept the homosexuality he had kept from the world until late in high school. Now 43 and the Queer Parenting Program co-ordinator at the 519 Church St. Community Centre in Toronto, he's helping others do the same.

In 2001, Mr. Veldhoven suffered a heart attack, a mind-focusing event that made him and Mr. Carter realize there was more to be done. They were seeing the progress of equal rights for gays, but were still prohibited from being a couple in the eyes of the law. They wanted to be married.

There followed letter-writing campaigns to newspapers and phone calls to federal and provincial legislators, as they joined with others throughout Canada to make gay marriage a reality.

Same-sex marriage was legally recognized in Ontario in 2003, which gave the movement a huge boost. Next came British Columbia, Quebec, Yukon and Manitoba.

In August, 2004, a Halifax lawyer filed a suit against the federal and provincial governments demanding same-sex marriage licences for three couples. On Sept. 23, the Nova Scotia Supreme Court ruled that banning such marriage was unconstitutional. The province said it would not fight the ruling.

Mr. Carter and Mr. Veldhoven wasted no time. They scrambled to get their paperwork together and three weeks later made history under a tent at the Live Bait Theatre they loved in Sackville, N.B., surrounded by family and 125 guests. Finally, they would gain legal recognition for being what they had been for decades - a family.

"They were a very public pair and that had a huge influence in Cumberland County and in Nova Scotia," said Eldon Hay, the long-time gay-rights activist from Sackville who presided at Mr. Carter's funeral.

"For a long time they didn't really flaunt [their homosexuality]. But when they started flaunting, they flaunted big time. They made a big splash."

"It was wonderful," Mr. Veldhoven said of the wedding, and all the more important to have done from the perspective of Mr. Carter's passing. "I never thought it would happen in my lifetime, but it came to pass."

Norman Carter

Norman Anthony Carter was born in Amherst, N.S., on Jan. 16, 1937. He died there on Jan. 4, 2010. He was 72. He leaves his spouse, Gerard Veldhoven, daughters Cindy McKillop and Laurel Carter, stepsons Christopher and Mark Veldhoven, grandchildren Tony White, Shannon Carter and Ashley Turner, great-grandson Justin Carter and step-grandchildren Mia and Abby Veldhoven.

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

In 1999 most legal benefits associated with marriage were extended to cohabitating same-sex couples in Canada. Starting in 2003, court decisions began to legalize same-sex marriage in various jurisdictions as follows:

June 10, 2003: Ontario (the ruling made it possible to register two marriages that had taken place in Toronto on Jan. 14, 2001, making Canada the first country in the world to have had a same-sex marriage.)

July 8, 2003: British Columbia

March 16, 2004: Quebec

July 14, 2004: Yukon Sept. 16, 2004: Manitoba

Sept. 24, 2004: Nova Scotia

Nov. 5, 2004: Saskatchewan

Dec. 21, 2004: Newfoundland and Labrador

June 23, 2005: New Brunswick

On July 20, 2005, the Civil Marriage Act became law in Canada, making the country the fourth in the world and the first in the Americas to legalize same-sex marriage nationwide. The House of Commons reaffirmed the legislation by 175 to 123 on Dec. 7, 2006, defeating a Conservative motion to review the law.

Friday, February 05, 2010

CORRECTION

Norman Carter and Gerard Veldhoven were married in Amherst, N.S., in 2004. Their wedding reception was held in Sackville, N.B. Incorrect information appeared in Mr. Carter's obituary on Feb. 1

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