

Panel...Pride Week 2013

Living in Canada has its rich rewards. Of course, that was not the case when I landed in Canada with my parents and three teenage brothers. At the age of 14, I was scared and alone with my sexual orientation.

It was alarming enough in The Netherlands where unlike present day, homosexuality was illegal and considered a mental illness. The same was true in Canada, as it was all over the world, and in fact most nations still have various degrees of punishment on the books today.

This move to Canada took place in 1954 and becoming accustomed to a new language, a new culture and a new landscape was challenging enough, but this secret I carried for a few years, became unbearable at times.

This terrible secret I was forced to carry during those early years was mentally unhealthy. For those of you who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender and lived during the fifties, sixties and seventies and beyond, are well aware of the lonely times, the bitterness towards one's own feelings and one may go through a feeling of internalized homophobia.

In 1962 I was hospitalized with pneumonia and I became very friendly with one of my nurses. A year later we were married. Of course, it was a difficult step, but in those years one was expected to get married and have a family. I loved my wife dearly and even as I wanted the companionship of a man, I remained married for 12 years.

I will tell you that becoming a father of two sons and two adorable granddaughters has been the pinnacle of my existence.

Being gay and not being able to be who you are is both disturbing and challenging. I remained true to my wife, but finally in 1974 I decided to end the marriage. It was one of the most difficult decisions I have ever faced. Leaving behind this terrific woman, a 7 year old and a 4 year old is traumatic, but it had to be decisive.

Even as it was heartbreaking, a feeling of relief came over me as I suddenly realized my life was taking another direction and ^{I was about to} embark on an unforgettable journey.

The divorce was certainly not amicable as the court hearings were very one-sided and a judge who glared at me throughout the proceedings. I was finally allowed to see my boys for two hours on Saturdays.

There was no equality in those years and one was forced to abide by the decisions of the courts.

At the time I was teaching at the Atlantic Provinces Resource Centre for the Hearing Handicapped. I decided to step out of the closet and became an activist for gay rights. I was told this was not a wise decision, especially in the teaching profession, but I was determined.

After a few difficult years at the school I was finally placed in a position where it became impossible to continue, so I resigned.

This was 1978 and gay rights had yet to be a reality.

During the fall of 1974, I met a man and we fell in love. I was finally going to settle down in small town Amherst, Nova Scotia and live as was natural for me. Norman had two teenage daughters who lived with him. We started living together in February of 1975. The town soon became aware of these two men setting up housekeeping with two daughters.

My sons and Norman's daughters were the target of some cruel jokes, but never physically hurt. This new family was the talk of the town. A few years later my ex-wife moved to Yarmouth and I was separated from the boys for awhile. Then, she decided that they should see their father regularly and there was a dramatic change. Even though the distance was a bit problematic it was workable.

As I mentioned, equal rights were not yet enshrined into the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and activism took off in full steam for many in the gay community. This was the 1970s and a year earlier, then Justice Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, declared that and I quote, "The government has no business in the bedrooms of the nation".

Soon a bill was passed introduced by Trudeau and homosexuality was decriminalized. Canada was one of the first nations to do so.

Svend Robinson, an openly gay Member of Parliament, fought vigorously for equal rights and I was spurred on by his determination. Then I thought back to

years ago when I came here as a scared 14 year-old and now here I am fighting for equal rights.

In the nineties same-sex marriage was the talk of those who felt same-sex couples should be able to marry. Again, many of us wrote letters to politicians and being very vocal wherever people would listen to us.

Ontario was the first province challenged and the courts decided it was unconstitutional to not allow same-sex couples to marry. Other provinces followed suit and then in September of 2004 three couples challenged the provincial marriage laws in Nova Scotia and Justice Heather Robertson instructed John Hamm's government to alter the marriage laws and give same-sex couples the right to marry. The government decided not to challenge the order.

We were very excited about this and made wedding plans. Three weeks later we were married in front of 125 guests, becoming the first same-sex couple to do so in Atlantic Canada.

It was a bit disconcerting as CTV and CBC television crews were present, but we strongly felt it would greatly help to normalize this new and wonderful thing that was now available to couples in our community. I felt a great sense of personal accomplishment and yet I was so overwhelmed by fighting the fight.

At my age it has become a bit more challenging to keep up the pace, however, I will push for equal treatment whenever and wherever, until I can do no more.

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After I resigned from teaching we set up our own drapery and upholstery business and it operated until Norman passed away in 2010, after having been a couple for thirty six years. His daughters remain close to me, as does his niece who was very special in his life, as well as mine.

My sons are the joy of my life and I have two adorable granddaughters. My oldest son Chris is also a ~~an~~ ^{LGBT} activist and educator in Toronto at the 519 Church Street Community Centre. Two years ago I was invited to the Centre in Toronto to speak to an audience of senior members of the LGBT community and Chris joined me in this venture.

Over the years I have often been asked to speak to various groups and I often refer to the years gone by as history must be remembered in order to appreciate what we have today.

I often reminisce and think back to 1954 and the years following and my life has been worth all the headaches, the challenges and then experience great moments of witnessing the advancement of rights for the LGBT community.

I did not foresee this during my lifetime. But here I am at 72 taking part in yet another Pride celebration.

I moved to New Glasgow last year and I have been rather overwhelmed by the friendly atmosphere and the wonderful people I have had the pleasure to meet. I am constantly reminded that Pictou County is a conservative area.

That may be, but I have yet to experience any opposition to my work. Being offered a column in a mainstream newspaper is unheard of and that my friends, is indicative of progress in Pictou County and the rest of Atlantic Canada.

I have seen much during my years and the fact remains that the fight is not yet over. We would love to believe all is well and we are well on our way.

At times the road to equal treatment is harsh and arduous. I say to you that the light at the end of the tunnel shines ever so much brighter since 1954, so we must continue to make attempts to eradicate homophobia and transphobia in the neighbourhoods of Canada, once and for all.