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Uncovering Calgary's proud past

Kevin Allen explores the secret history of Calgary's queer community

Kevin Allen began his research at this year's Pride parade, talking to queer seniors about their experiences.



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With the 2012 Calgary Pride Week behind us, it is clear that Alberta's queer community has come a long way in the past few years. Alison Redford became our first premier to speak at a Gay Pride festival, a large symbolic leap forward for our province. While there is a modicum of homophobia and transphobia still present in some aspects of our society, it is vastly overshadowed by a national acceptance of queer people and queer culture. However, it would be false to think that things have always been this way.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and allied people in Calgary have a history, albeit, a history that is not very well known. It is a history of secrets, underground meeting places and courageous individuals. Unfortunately, it has been hidden and buried by the passage of time, but local historian and writer Kevin Allen is hoping to change that and bring queer history in Calgary into the light.

Allen, the executive director of the Alberta Media Arts Alliance, a former NUTV alumnus and founder of the Fairy Tales Presentation Society, is undertaking a project in which he will uncover the history of queer Calgarians in the '50s and '60s using a combination of histori-

cal documents and first-hand accounts.

"I've become very interested as I've grown older in the queer community's past, particularly from before I was born," explains Allen. "I was born in 1970 in Calgary, a third-generation Calgarian. I talked to my parents a little bit about what it was like to be gay back in the '50s and '60s, and they basically had no idea because it was so underground. So that got me thinking: What did gay people do before then? Where

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— Kevin Allen, writer and historian

did they meet? Where did they go? What were their lives like? That was sort of the genesis of this project."

The information and interviews Allen collects will be presented on his website, for the benefit of Calgary's queer community and anyone interested in this aspect of the city's past. In order to complete this project, Allen decided to seek help from one of the most important parts of Calgary's LGBTQA community.

"I applied to be the artist/historian in residence at Calgary Outlink, which is the queer community centre in Calgary," says Allen. "It used to be called the Gay and Lesbian

Community Services Association, and I used to volunteer with them back in the '90s. Before the Internet, their phone lines were a really important way for the queer community to interact, so it felt appropriate to pick the Outlink and the Old Y Centre downtown as my host location."

After receiving a grant through Calgary 2012, a non-profit organization devoted to supporting the city's culture, Allen started his five week residency at Calgary Outlink.

He only recently began his research at the 2012 Calgary Pride parade, hoping to find queer seniors interested in sharing their stories.

"I did sort of age profile people at Pride, and handed out my card to seniors," says Allen. "The goal is to interview queer seniors and get their recollection of what life was like for them back then, before what was sort of considered the queer emancipation."

These interviews are immensely important to Allen's research, due to very few documents being available on the topic. Before the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969, which

was one of the first demonstrations against anti-homosexual legislation in the United States, queer communities across North America existed almost only underground.

"From the initial data we have, it looks like I'll really have to rely heavily on individual recollections as my primary source," Allen explains. "I'm looking at different archives across the country and locally, and a lot of the archival material really only starts in the '70s, and there is almost nothing in the '50s and '60s. Some of the bigger cities are different, Toronto and Vancouver have more established archives, but for Calgary it was pretty underground. It is a secret history, on some level."

However, with the topic of Allen's research being as personal and sensitive as it is, he has needed to be sure to place the wishes of those he interviews before his project.

"Not everyone is comfortable recounting some of those stories, and not everyone is comfortable with having those stories recorded," says Allen. "I'm sensitive to peoples' desires, and won't do what they don't want."

Despite the difficulties he has had in the first few days in his research, Allen has already found some interesting pieces of Calgarian queer history, from both the archival records and through talking with queer seniors.

"There was a bar in the Palliser

Hotel in the basement that was, on Friday nights in the '60s, the place where queer people gathered," says Allen. "So it's kind of interesting that the Palliser, which is a Calgary landmark in the centre of our city, was also this underground gay bar. I also just found an article from the *Calgary Herald* from 1979 which says Calgary is going to become the equivalent of Canada's San Francisco in two years. Things didn't exactly work out that way, but it's interesting to see those headlines."

We currently live in a world where the conservative premier of Alberta is proud to speak at a Gay Pride festival, and where one of Calgary's biggest film festivals is devoted to queer culture. It is a world that has come a long way, and is continuing to head in the right direction. Through his research, Allen is hoping to ensure that we won't forget the people who brought us here.

"I don't think any group can take for granted the privileges and the rights and freedoms that they have," says Allen. "And I think our current set of freedoms are connected to queer activism in the past and people being active and courageous. I think it is really interesting to see this progression, and that there is an advantage to understanding our past and where we came from."

For more information on Kevin Allen's project, including ways to help him with his work, visit calgaryqueerhistory.ca.