

Youth Outreach Initiatives at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives



KATE ZIEMAN

RÉSUMÉ Fondées en 1973, les Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA) ont continué de grandir pour devenir le deuxième plus grand dépôt d'archives lesbien, gai, bisexuel et transgenre (LGBT) au monde. L'organisation est déménagée récemment dans un nouvel immeuble au cœur du village gai de Toronto et cet événement a occasionné un accent plus grand sur le rayonnement de l'institution et la programmation publique. En même temps, la parution du rapport du gouvernement de l'Ontario sur les écoles sécuritaires a mené plusieurs écoles publiques à développer des programmes d'éducation pour contrer l'homophobie. Puisque plusieurs enseignants ne sont pas au courant des questions LGBT, ou même à l'aise d'en parler, les CLGA sont bien placées pour devenir une ressource éducative importante. Le comité d'engagement communautaire des CLGA s'est donné la tâche de créer et de donner des communications au sujet de l'histoire LGBT au Canada. Bien que ces communications aient connu beaucoup de succès, le lancement d'une exposition semi-permanente présentée dans les locaux du nouvel immeuble des CLGA pourrait s'avérer une alternative encore plus efficace.

ABSTRACT Founded in 1973, the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives has grown to become the second-largest LGBT repository in the world. The organization recently moved to a spacious new facility in the heart of Toronto's gay village, and this has occasioned a new emphasis on public outreach and programming. Concomitantly, the publication of the Government of Ontario's Safe Schools Report has prompted many of the province's public schools to develop anti-homophobia educational programs. Given that many teachers may not be familiar or comfortable with LGBT issues, the CLGA is well-positioned to become a valuable educational resource. The CLGA's Community Engagement Committee has taken on the task of creating and delivering presentations about LGBT history in Canada. While these presentations have been quite successful, a semi-permanent exhibition housed at the CLGA's new location may prove to be a more efficient alternative.

Introduction

The Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA) has been growing steadily for more than three decades. The organization recently moved to a spacious new facility in the heart of Toronto's gay village, which has occasioned a

new emphasis on outreach and public programming, particularly for younger people seeking information about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) history. Interestingly, the CLGA's outreach efforts have coincided with efforts to incorporate anti-homophobia educational programs into Ontario's public school curriculum. School boards across the province will soon be seeking community partners to assist with a variety of initiatives, and the CLGA is well-positioned to adopt this educational role in Toronto.

CLGA: History, Scope, and Mission

The CLGA is a volunteer-run, non-profit organization charged with preserving material from Canada's LGBT communities. The archives was started in 1973 by the collective which published *The Body Politic*, Canada's most influential gay liberation publication. At its inception, the CLGA's core collection consisted of *The Body Politic's* own records, and the magazine helped the fledgling organization grow by advertising its existence and soliciting donations from readers across Canada. After the demise of *The Body Politic* in 1987, the CLGA continued to thrive, and it is now the second-largest LGBT archives in the world¹ (the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles, which also grew out of a gay community publication, is the largest). In its quest to preserve and provide access to Canadian LGBT history, the CLGA has collected records of individuals and organizations; vertical files on various people and events; photographs; posters; recordings and sound discs; moving image materials; books (including several rare volumes); gay and lesbian periodicals; pamphlets; monographs; press clippings; and straight periodicals (or periodicals aimed at a predominantly heterosexual readership) with LGBT content. In addition to this lengthy list, the CLGA also maintains hundreds of artifacts, including t-shirts, matchbooks, banners, and buttons. These items are included for their importance as records in their own right, but also because they are unlikely to be preserved elsewhere. This approach is typical of LGBT archives; as Anne Cvetkovich writes, "in insisting on the value of apparently marginal or ephemeral materials, the collectors of gay and lesbian archives propose that affects – associated with nostalgia, personal memory, fantasy, and trauma – make a document significant."² In 1998, the CLGA established the National Portrait Collection, which honours LGBT Canadians such as Jane Rule, k.d. lang, George Hislop, and Kyle Rae.

- 1 The Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA) has undergone several name changes. It was originally called the Canadian Gay Liberation Archives, became the Canadian Gay Archives in 1975, and finally adopted its current name in 1993. See "A Chronology of the Archives," www.clga.ca (accessed on 9 April 2009).
- 2 Anne Cvetkovich, "In the Archives of Lesbian Feelings: Documentary and Popular Culture," *Camera Obscura* 49 (2002), p. 112.

Historian Steven Maynard believes that the founding of the CLGA “in many ways marked the beginning of a self-conscious gay history movement in Canada.”³ Until recently, the discovery and documentation of LGBT history was, for the most part, a community based enterprise, likely because of the “exclusion of lesbian and gay history from universities and academic journals, and the conscious and unconscious suppression of lesbian/gay materials in mainstream archives.”⁴ However, given the explosion of academic and popular interest in LGBT issues over the past fifteen years or so, some community based organizations have elected to broaden their constituencies beyond those that they traditionally served. This is evident in the CLGA’s current mission statement,⁵ in which phrases such as “all those who strive” and “all who seek” indicate a conscious move away from a more iterative notion of the archives’ importance – namely that it exists to reflect and help construct LGBT identities – toward a more open and accessible resource that can be used by any individual interested in LGBT issues.

Anti-homophobia Education in Ontario

Broadening the CLGA’s mission has coincided with a growing emphasis on equity education in Ontario’s schools. While the situation for many LGBT people has improved greatly over the past couple of decades, LGBT youth still experience higher rates of suicide, homelessness, and harassment than their heterosexual peers.⁶ Measures are finally being taken to address this crisis. The Government of Ontario’s Safe Schools Report, released in December 2008, recommends that topics such as sexual identity, homophobia, gender-based violence and sexual harassment be introduced in Grade 6 and then developed in greater depth from Grades 7–9.⁷ These age-appropriate lessons

3 Steven Maynard, “‘The Burning, Wilful Evidence’: Lesbian/Gay History and Archival Research,” *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–92), p. 196.

4 Ibid.

5 “The CLGA aspires to be a significant resource and catalyst for those who strive for a future world where lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people are accepted, valued, and celebrated. We will build on our position as the leading treasury and destination for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) heritage in Canada and as a leader within a global community of similar organizations. We serve all who seek to discover the LGBT communities’ stories including our struggle for understanding, acceptance, and equality.” Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, “Mission,” 2006.

6 Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) Canada reports the following statistics: LGBT students hear antigay slurs an average of twenty-six times per day; LGBT youth are more likely to become homeless; twenty-six percent of LGBT youth are told to leave home; and thirty percent of suicides are LGBT. See <http://www.pflagcanada.ca/en/index-e.asp> (accessed on 6 April 2009).

7 Safe Schools Action Team, *Shaping a Culture of Respect in Our Schools: Promoting Safe and Healthy Relationships* (Toronto, 2008), p. 14.

would be formally conducted in Health and Physical Education classes, though the report recommends that the topics be broached in as many subjects as possible. To date, there has been little consistency in the way that these issues have been addressed in schools across the province, and the degree and quality of discussion has been predicated on the teacher's comfort level. While Education Minister Kathleen Wynne is not required to adopt the report's recommendations, she has indicated to its authors that she plans to do so.⁸

The implementation of the Safe Schools Report's recommendations would ensure that anti-homophobia education is integrated into publicly funded school curricula across the province. Some school boards have already taken significant steps in this direction. For example, the Toronto District School Board's (TDSB) Equity Foundation Statement has had a section devoted to anti-homophobia and sexual orientation education for quite some time. This document pledges that "ideals related to anti-homophobia and sexual orientation equity" are to be reflected across the TDSB, and that "all lesbian and gay students and students who identify themselves on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity ... see themselves reflected in the curriculum."⁹ With or without the implementation of the Safe Schools Report, it is likely that school boards across the province will be implementing similarly specific directives in the years to come.

Community Partnerships

Despite the burgeoning official support for anti-homophobia and sexual orientation education, teachers who are uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the topics may struggle to provide appropriate lessons or resources. This knowledge gap can be overcome with the help of community based organizations, which can assist in a variety of ways, such as providing resources, giving tours, making presentations, and so forth. Both the Safe Schools Report and the TDSB Equity Policy recommend that schools forge strong partnerships with relevant community groups, and in the Greater Toronto Area the CLGA is now well positioned to take on that role.

Recent Youth Outreach Activities

Due largely to space constraints, the CLGA's outreach and public programming initiatives were minimal for the first three decades of its existence.

8 Krishna Rau, "Ontario Safe Schools Report Calls for Change," *Xtra* (23 December 2008), http://www.xtra.ca/public/Toronto/Ontario_Safe_Schools_Report_calls_for_change-6065.aspx (accessed on 7 April 2009).

9 Toronto District School Board (TDSB), *Equity Foundation Statement & Commitments to Equity Policy Implementation* (Toronto, 2000), p. 14.

However, the formation of the Community Engagement Committee in 2006 and the archives' recent move to a spacious, historic property in the heart of Toronto's gay village have created more suitable conditions for such activities.



Figure 1: The Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives on its Grand Opening Day, 26 September 2009.

The Community Engagement Committee is mandated to “support the Archives’ mission and values by encouraging and developing outreach programs, displays, and exhibits with LGBT and other groups and institutions.”¹⁰ The Committee meets once a month and is currently comprised of approximately ten members, representing a broad range of backgrounds and skills. Early Committee activities included the creation of an archival exhibit for the Inside Out Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festival, hosting donor recognition receptions, and staffing information booths at the Toronto Pride festivities. Up until 2008, outreach activities were targeted at people of university age and older, though the Committee recently started getting requests from high school teachers wanting to schedule presentations about local LGBT history in their schools. To date, these presentations have

10 Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, “Community Engagement Committee Mandate,” 2006.

consisted of an overview of LGBT history in Canada, followed by a question and answer period, and a general discussion among the students. Presenters have shown PowerPoint slides featuring key images and talking points, and have also distributed a small selection of duplicate periodical covers, posters, and pamphlets. Students have been encouraged to share experiences and opinions throughout the presentation, and have been invited to visit the Community Engagement Committee's blog¹¹ to learn more about the archives. To date, presentations have taken place during anti-homophobia education days and the audience has generally been limited to students who belong to Positive Space clubs; however, given the progressive education policies being developed and implemented across the province, there is certainly potential to create more regular programming that would complement the curriculum of Ontario's public schools.¹²

As successful as the Community Engagement Committee's school presentations have been, they require a great deal of volunteer time and effort. It can be difficult to distill several decades of LGBT history into a one-hour presentation while simultaneously attempting to provide an introduction to the CLGA and what it does; furthermore, volunteers must sometimes travel a significant distance. A more efficient option under consideration is the creation of a semi-permanent, in-house archival exhibition highlighting prominent events in Canadian LGBT history. These could include the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1969, the inclusion of sexual orientation in the first march on Parliament Hill in 1971, early Pride festivities, the emergence of AIDS activism, and the fight for same-sex marriage. Such an exhibition would consist of copies of relevant material from the CLGA's collection, and would be framed by a brief introductory lecture and discussion questions. As the students would be physically present in the archives, they would potentially gain a better sense of what the CLGA strives to do (and by extension, what other archival institutions are doing), what sorts of items it collects, and how it protects its materials.

Fortunately, the CLGA's new home features a reading room, a large gallery, and a meeting room that could easily accommodate twenty to thirty students. As noted, the archives has quite an eclectic collection, and an exhibition could include ephemera (e.g., buttons, t-shirts, etc.), in addition to moving images, periodicals, photographs, and newspaper clippings. The existing blog could also continue to serve as a tool to provide additional archival instruction as well as a forum in which to discuss the issues presented in the exhibit.

11 See <http://clgaengagement.blogspot.com/> (accessed on 30 September 2009).

12 According to their Equity Policy, the TDSB seeks to support LGBT students by, among other things, "ensuring that the contributions to Canadian and world history and historiography from gay and lesbian communities ... are included accurately in all aspects of the curriculum." TDSB, "Equity," p. 15.

While students would benefit from any kind of anti-homophobia education, an exhibition would provide a valuable affective experience by bringing them into contact with the “real thing.” A 1950s tabloid article about a police raid on a gay bar or a photograph of the first local Pride festivities could serve as entry points for a more in-depth consideration of LGBT people’s struggle for civil rights.

Conclusion

Educational programming in an LGBT archives would have been an unthinkable proposition not so long ago, and it is likely that many schools outside of the Metropolitan Toronto area would still be resistant to the possibility. However, if the Ministry of Education adopts the recommendations of the Safe Schools Report, the CLGA may soon find itself getting more requests for resources and input. While the Community Engagement Committee has conducted excellent small-scale presentations in selected schools, an archival exhibition highlighting some of the key developments in Canadian LGBT history would be more suitable for larger groups of students. Additionally, an archival exhibition would not require the same amount of volunteer time and effort as an in-school presentation. This is a significant consideration in an organization that does not currently have any paid staff. With careful planning and co-ordination with teachers, the CLGA will be able to provide age-appropriate history lessons that emphasize the value of primary sources and the importance of archival context.