

LGBTQ Activism

Small Town Social Change

LES MARPLE AND VICTORIA LATCHMORE

Les régions rurales n'offrent pas toujours aux lesbiennes, aux gais, aux trans, aux bisexuelles, aux queer (LGBTQ), des activités exclusives, des programmes communautaires. Cet article rapporte les structures, l'approche et les résultats d'un projet de développement communautaire sur une période de 12 mois qui s'est déroulé à Antigonish en Nouvelle-Écosse.

Rural lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities have the potential to find themselves in a state of dual isolation. There is first the difference experienced from heteronormative culture and society, and secondly the isolation from urban LGBTQ culture and political movements. Rural spaces do not always offer LGBTQ exclusive events, programs or communities and in exploring other examples of Rural LGBTQ programs, we were unable to find many similar models in Canada. This article will provide a brief description and analysis of the LGBTQ activism and programming that took place in Antigonish, Nova Scotia mainly during the past three years. Our aim is to document some of the quieter, smaller LGBTQ histories and evolutions, those events that may not capture headlines, but which are ongoing and transformative in the lives of LGBTQ individuals in our region.

Antigonish is unique when compared to other local rural regions. This is due to factors including the presence of a university in this town of 5,000, the town of Antigonish operating as a service centre for Antigonish County (population 19,500) (Statistics Canada), and Antigonish's designation as a Regional Health Centre. The student population at St. Francis Xavier University (StFX) is 4,000 students and each September, the population of Antigonish experiences a significant swell as students return and university classes resume. The presence of StFX University and the Regional Hospital means that there is significant migration into the Antigonish region when compared to other rural areas in North Eastern Nova Scotia. Despite this movement, the dominant local

religious influence remains Catholic, with 80 per cent of the population of the County identifying itself as such (Aslan). The local Catholic community remains traditional in its approach and has significant influence over local politics and education. Antigonish is often identified by members of local social justice organizations as a town of contradictions; for example despite the traditional nature of the region, there is a strong and vibrant feminist women's community. These contradictions result in interesting challenges and collaborative efforts for social change work.

Beginning in June 2004, Antigonish became the host site of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Community Safety Initiative funded in part by the National Crime Prevention Strategy. This was a locally initiated, rural community development project whose goal was to open a dialogue and continue the work of social change around acceptance and celebration of our local LGBTQ communities. The project developed out of student activism, and evolved into a community initiative that worked in conjunction with the local RCMP detachment, the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre, the regional school board, diverse service providers, students, and community members.

This project adapted from existing models of Positive Space and Ally training programs where participants attend a training session and display a symbol of their support for LGBTQ communities. Adaptations were made in order to ensure that the work was appropriate to a rural region. While the work of this project included male participants, volunteers, and advisory committee members, the focus of this article is to acknowledge and explore the impact of the LGBTQ project for women living in Antigonish and other surrounding rural regions.

Organized LGBTQ activism in Antigonish exists formally in two spheres: the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) and StFX University. Over the past ten years the AWRC has organized awareness workshops,

hosted a lesbian film festival, distributed information regarding lesbian communities through such forums as their newsletter, and provided ongoing support for women throughout the community. At StFX University, the Alliance for Sexual Diversity at X (ASD@X), formed in the late 1990s as an education and awareness raising organization, was the first public or “out” LGBTQ organization on campus. The LGBT Community Safety Initiative in its inception provided these two local communities, a feminist, service-based women’s centre and a university, an opportunity to draw on each other’s strengths and resources in order to support social change work on campus and throughout the region.

Much of the history of this project began at StFX with the student-run ASD@X group. ASD@X’s mandate focuses on activism and the group organized a variety of events on campus and in the community at large. The work of this group was often missed or overlooked, with promotion made particularly challenging due to a persistent removal or destruction of most LGBTQ activity advertising and promotional materials on campus and in town.

It was not until sexual health workshops were organized in February of 2003 by ASD@X that the group became better known in Antigonish. The intent of these workshops was to ensure that safe, accurate, and LGBTQ inclusive sexual health information be made available in the community. In response to the announcement of these workshops, representatives of the university-funded Chaplaincy department at StFX went to the president of the university to request that this student group not be permitted to use the Students’ Union Building. The subject of the workshops was included in a homily delivered to hundreds of StFX students at the weekly university mass. Immediately following the service, a group of students left the church and destroyed the promotional banners and posters advertising the workshops on display in the Students’ Union Building. The workshops took place nevertheless and were extremely well attended, although the second workshop attracted a group of students who formed a rosary circle outside of the event in protest. The resulting resistance led to both increased politicization of the LGBTQ and ally communities as well as an increased experience of oppression and victimization due to greater visibility of LGBTQ communities.

Following the incidents around the sexual health workshop female StFX students found themselves experiencing increased intimidation on campus. There were instances of harassment of women students by males while operating information tables in the Students’ Union Building, students were criticized and ridiculed by males in their classes, and negative commentary regarding the LGBTQ communities were published in the campus newspaper. A lack of effective means through which to confront the issues inspired a desire to organize in a way which would

better allow LGBTQ communities to address their own experiences of oppression, without a need to rely on existing forums which were homophobic, insensitive to the safety concerns of LGBTQ women, unaware of trans-politics, and intimidating to access.

Thus, in 2003 ASD@X held a focus group with discussion around experiences of LGBTQ students on campus. Stories of the negative experiences of LGBTQ students came out in this work along with an outline for what students needed in terms of support on campus. A proposal was prepared for StFX administration recommending that an LGBTQ Student Advisor be hired as exists for other student groups on campus. This proposal was accepted, but the university indicated that they were unable to invest money in this initiative. Efforts were then made to find outside funding sources.

The Community Mobilization Program (CMP) of Crime Prevention was identified as an excellent fit for the type of project funding required to implement the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Community Safety Initiative. Although Crime Prevention was initially hesitant to fund a project addressing transphobia and homophobia as risks to community safety, funding was eventually secured. Crime Prevention affiliation offered the project levels of legitimacy in our conservative rural region which had not before been experienced by LGBTQ groups. The choice to operate out of the Antigonish Women’s Resource Centre as a project of the Antigonish Women’s Association situated the initiative in a feminist organization with over 20 years of history of local social change activism, a history that also provided the project with immediate connections within the community.

The initial stages of the project were aimed at grounding this work within the community. Historically, only a handful of non-LGBTQ allies would attend LGBTQ events. But the project found itself beginning this work in the midst of an interesting political climate. Same-sex marriage legislation was a key topic in the current federal election, the media was full of debates on these issues, and there was a broader public consciousness of LGBTQ issues than had existed previously. This public media attention gave a type of permission or incentive to local organizations to engage in LGBTQ work.

In a small rural community, challenge of the project included a conscious effort to ensure that the feminist and queer politics of the work were not sacrificed and to associate the project with well-known and respected community members. The advantage of a smaller community is the impact that can be had if this networking is successful. A Steering Committee made up of a small group of feminist women who had experience working both within the Antigonish community and with LGBTQ populations was established. The Steering Committee directed the development of a Community Advisory Committee that included representatives from health, justice, education, and community activists and gave the project access to

large professional groups such as the Regional Health Authority, the regional School Board and StFX administration and faculty.

The Advisory Committee was an exciting balance between long-time community activists with political influence in the local community, as well as new and innovative university employees who brought their energy to challenge the local status quo. This group was made up almost exclusively of women who committed extensive energy and time to promotion of this work. The Community Advisory Committee was run on a collective model where

school because there wasn't a safe space. This initiative gives me hope. (Dove 1)

Local media coverage in the Antigonish newspaper, *The Casket*, was seen as a tool for normalizing LGBTQ issues in the public mind. This Catholic publication provided a factual account of the project and resulted in an unprecedented lack of backlash ("Positive space program launched"). The importance of first having received media coverage, and second receiving no negative feedback was monumental for the town of Antigonish. We know

It has been inspiring for so many in the community to experience the way in which this project was embraced in a community that has often suffered a reputation of being closed-minded and unwelcoming.

meetings were facilitated to encourage members to contribute their ideas, skills, suggestions, and individual expertise to the work. At the first Advisory meeting members were provided with resource packages in order to introduce a topic to a population where many people had had little opportunity previously to discuss LGBTQ populations, promote collective ownership of the work, and to share resources as a tool in explaining and legitimizing the project to those who were skeptical of its validity. This group integrated the concepts and goals of the project into their respective workplaces that resulted in increased registrations and bookings for anti-oppression workshops.

A key success of the LGBTQ Community Safety Initiative was its local development, and presence in the community. The project was able to make adjustments to suit the local culture and climate. An example of this is the choice not to use the term "queer" in the project title. In the local region, "queer" is still a colloquial word, with many negative connotations. It was decided that in order to avoid offending both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ individuals, this word would not be used in the project title. We saw this point as a key to the success of delivering LGBTQ training in a region without a history of activity in this area.

The first public event of the project was the launch of the Positive Space training program at StFX. This launch received supportive media attention from town and student newspapers. The StFX student newspaper, *The Xaverian* reported the perspective of one professor,

This seems like the culmination of various struggles," expressed Nancy Forestell of the Women's Studies and History Department. "It has been frustrating at times to see wonderful people and students leave this

that this was not only beneficial to the project, but also to the sense of belonging of LGBTQ community members and felt it indicated a significant shift in regards to the willingness of Antigonish to embrace change.

The first Positive Space training workshops of the project were held at StFX in the fall of 2004. These workshops were as participant driven as possible with the facilitator's role being to guide the conversation, or to provide information when necessary. Once the workshops began, the project had an ever increasing support base of allies. The use of a standard symbol, the sticker, and button, which could only be attained through participation in a workshop was an excellent means through which to promote this work and to inspire others to do the training. Many of the workshop participants wore their buttons, put up their stickers, and took responsibility for a piece of the education work in the community. The buttons and stickers were especially effective in our small community because they were displayed, and seen, by a large percentage of our community, a task that would have been much more challenging in a larger urban environment.

Because of the location of the work at the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre and a local history where women have been the primary leaders for social change in the community, the project was heavily influenced by women and feminist approaches to anti-oppression work. It was truly the women in our community who overwhelmingly responded to this work, and who brought it forward. Women in the community who were not LGBTQ identified, acted as key contributors to this work through both professional and personal connections. In looking at the influences of the work, the project's scope could be segmented into three groups: youth, LGBTQ identified women and non-LGBTQ women.

The youth who were actively engaged and who organized through the project were all women. Through the supports provided by the project, as well as the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre, these youth were able to overcome significant blocks and resistance in the local high school's administration in order to finally receive approval to operate a Gay Straight Alliance at their school. The youth also had an opportunity to participate in an event entitled *Reworking the Periphery* organized between StFX and the LGBT Community Safety Initiative. This weekend event included lectures, a drag show, and a one-day workshop. Youth we spoke to said it was the "greatest thing that ever happened in Antigonish." This initiative had a profound impact not only on youths' perceptions of themselves, but as was noted by one youth, it challenged her to realize "that things like this could happen in a rural place." One young organizer said she felt more "empowered and able to change stuff." The leadership development role that the project played with youth is a key piece of the LGBT Safety Initiative.

As a result of the overwhelmingly positive response to this work, the LGBTQ population in Antigonish received an unexpected boost in support. Antigonish's reaction to LGBTQ populations had previously only been evidenced in homophobic articles in the religion section and letters to the editor in *The Casket*. The levels of acceptance and support that existed in the community were unknown to us prior to this initiative but were clearly evident when a fundraiser for the LGBT Community Safety Initiative was attended by 200 community members.

This initiative was instrumental in giving voice to LGBTQ individuals and non-LGBTQ allies. The sessions were run with mixed groups, so that many LGBTQ individuals were given a supportive environment in which to analyze and discuss their challenges of living in a rural region. Non-LGBTQ individuals benefited from an opportunity to better hear and understand these experiences and to explore ways in which to confront issues of oppression and prejudice. There was a great deal of surprise amongst members of LGBTQ communities, who had not anticipated a positive response to these workshops, let alone the overwhelming embracing of this work that was evident both during and after the project. As a result of the initiative, LGBTQ women described an improved sense of safety and belonging.

Through the many public Positive Space training sessions, many women had the opportunity to participate in this work and to discuss oppression and the operation of power in our community. This analysis was not kept exclusively to issues of gender identity and sexual orientation, but offered an occasion to discuss other forms of power and oppression experienced or observed by workshop participants. Exciting developments came out of these workshops. Many of the participants went on to organize training sessions within their places of employment, and to begin to challenge homophobia as they

witnessed it in their lives. Three allies from one of the workshops decided to organize a positive space T-shirt campaign. These StFX students sold over 250 shirts in the Antigonish community, with participants all wearing the shirts on February 15, 2005 to coincide with Pink Triangle Day on February 14 as a sign of support for LGBTQ positive spaces.

What is most difficult to document is the shift in attitudes and perceptions, as well as the new sense of space and support that the LGBTQ community in the Antigonish region has experienced. This shift provided an opportunity for LGBTQ individuals to identify themselves publicly within safe social spaces, as well as the chance for non-LGBTQ allies to participate actively as visible supporters of this community. It has been inspiring for so many in the community to experience the way in which this project was embraced in a community that has often suffered a reputation of being closed-minded and unwelcoming. This project speaks to the possibility for rural communities to challenge and to grow despite external and internal perceptions of what is possible for these spaces. The rural sphere can be radical and the possibilities for rural engagement can even surprise those of us who call these communities home.

Les Marple developed and coordinated the LGBT Community Safety Initiative in Antigonish. For more information on this project, and access to the resource manual, please see www.stfx.ca/campus/stu-serv/equity/LGBT.htm

Victoria Latchmore is a fourth-year student at St. Francis Xavier University and summer research assistant for the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre. She had extensive and ongoing involvement with the project as a volunteer facilitator.

References

- Aslan, Luca. "Interview with Dr. Lucian Turcescu" *Radio Voice of America (Washington, DC)*. 23 Feb 2000. 25 Aug 2005 <http://artsandscience.concordia.ca/facstaff/S-U/turcescu/voa1.html>
- Dove, Amy. "Hate is not a family value" *The Xaverian* 27 October. 2004: Pg.1
- "Positive space program launched." *The Casket*. 27 October. 2004: Pg. 11
- Statistics Canada. *Census of Nova Scotia*. 2001. Online: 26 August 2005 <http://www.gov.ns.ca/finance/publish/CENSUS/Census%201.pdf>