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HFX DAILY

Thursday, July 20, 2006

History project aims to uncover Halifax's gay past

By Dean Lisk
The Daily News

A local history project is digging into the past to chronicle the stories of the men and women who played a role in the creation of Halifax's gay community.

"The current generation always thinks they invented whatever it is," said Daniel MacKay, who has spent the last five years as a regular contributor to the simply named History Project.

An online encyclopedia, its goal is to eventually have information on every place, thing or event significant to the Halifax's gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender culture in the city.

"It is great to be able to tell young people, 'Here are some interesting stories about what life was like,'" said MacKay. "It shows that people were working at the time, and remind people the world was substantially different not so long ago."

"What I am interested in is getting people to tell the stories about how the community started out in Halifax, and what was important during those heady days of the early '70s."



Swing battah! Team Diva watch as their team bats during the Dykes versus Divas softball game at the Halifax Common last Sunday. (Photo: Darren Calabrese)

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MackKay said that decade is considered the starting point of the gay community in Halifax. Before then, there were house parties and groups of people, but nothing organized.

A lot of the basic information in the encyclopedia comes from two sources, he said. The first is Robin Metcalfe's *Queer Looking, Queer Acting*. It is an essay the curator of the Saint Mary's University Art Gallery compiled in 1997 to compliment an art show of local gay ephemera — things such as posters and photographs.

The second source is local resident Chris Aucoin's 24-page history of gay Halifax, published for Pride Week in 2003.

History Project uses computer software — the same as the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia — which allows people to add missing information. About 30 people have contributed material, with a handful submitting information to a variety of articles. Volunteer editors then check the material to make sure it is accurate.

"It's a two-edged sword," said MackKay, who explains its great to get the information, but sometimes inaccuracies creep in.

"Most people are surprised by a variety of things in there."

He said one of the stories he finds fascinating revolves around The Green Lantern Building, located at 1585 Barrington St. In 1975, it was an unofficial gay community centre in the city, with gay-owned businesses — the names of which the project is still trying to discover — apartments owned by gay men, and a bar.

'Annoying and bizarre'

"A lot of people have forgotten about that, more information about it would be great."

MackKay said one difficulty is getting early activists in the community to tell their stories, for a variety of reasons. Some are modest, some have gone back in the closet, and other are just tired of talking about it.

"For me, it's annoying and bizarre, but it is a fact of life."

He says a lot of the basic information is there, and the contributors are trying to fill in the huge gaps in details. This is true, except for when it comes to women's history.

"Women were at least as important in the formation of the gay community in the early '70s as men — possibly more important. But, for a variety of reasons, we haven't heard their stories."

"There are a number of women organizations not documented in the

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encyclopedia."

Mackay hopes to eventually get funding to hire a researcher or writer in the next couple of years. They will go out and interview pioneers of the movement in Halifax still willing to talk about their experiences and tell their story.

"These are people who were young in the '60s and '70s," he said. "They were there and did the work, and are getting a little long in the tooth. They will, as time goes on, be even less interested in telling their stories."

For more information, visit gay.hfxns.org/HistoryProject.

More **HFX Daily**:

History project aims to uncover Halifax's gay... [7/20/2006] ▼

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