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Community helps bring Anita Martinez's historic photo archive to life at Dal

Dal Archives hosts captioning event series

Kristy Read - May 21, 2026



More than 80 photograph albums and thousands of loose photographs are part of the collection, which documents Halifax's 2SLGBTQIA+ communities and women's movements. (Submitted photos)

Anita Martinez's friends, acquaintances, and members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community gathered at the Killam Library this month to look through thousands of photos showing decades of queer life and feminist activism in Nova Scotia.

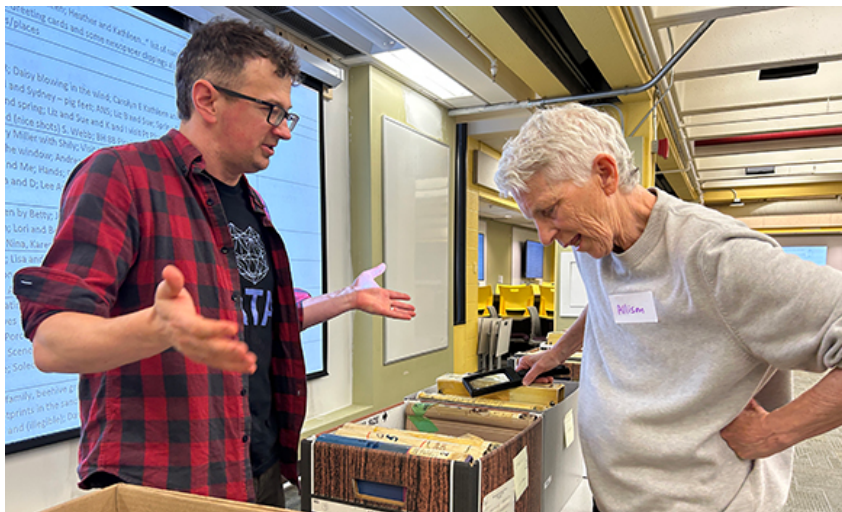
Martinez, who passed away in February 2025, was a prolific photographer and activist whose work documented Halifax’s 2SLGBTQIA+ communities and women’s movements for more than four decades.

The gathering, hosted by [Dalhousie University Archives](#), was not just social; it was archival work in action.

The captioning party focused on the [Anita Martinez fonds](#), one of the largest photograph collections ever acquired by Dal Archives. The initiative was the first in a series of events inviting community members to help identify people, places, and moments captured in Martinez’s images.

“**The collection is an extraordinary record of local Queer communities and women’s rights activism.**”

“The collection includes over 80 photograph albums and thousands of loose photographs,” says Creighton Barrett of Dal Archives. “We know the collection is an extraordinary record of local Queer communities and women’s rights activism, but we can’t always identify the individuals that Anita photographed.”



Creighton Barrett of Dal Archives, left, chats with a participant in the recent captioning event.

Daniel MacKay, editor of Wayves Magazine and co-organizer of the captioning parties, describes the collection as “a matchless record of local queer and feminist life, spanning rallies, community events, and more personal moments of connection and celebration.”

While the scale of the collection is remarkable, its true value depends on context. Without captions, even the most striking images can remain incomplete and details can be lost to time. Faces go unnamed, events are unplaced, histories are only partially visible.

That is where the captioning parties come in.

“The purpose of the captioning parties is to enrich the archival record by adding names, dates, locations, and cultural context that may not be documented elsewhere,” Barrett explains. “These gatherings draw on collective memory and lived experience, helping to preserve community history and ensure more accurate, inclusive descriptions.”

From the Vault

Dalhousie Archives holds more than a million photographs.

Other large collections include:

- **The Wamboldt-Waterfield Collection**: More than 100,000 photographs.
- **Waldren Studios Collection**: About 55,000 photographs.
- **Nova Scotia Mass Choir Collection**: About 5,700 photographs found in the Joy O'Brien fonds.

Participants bring a depth of knowledge that helps tell the stories behind the photographs. Many of them lived through or helped shape the scenes depicted. The process is collaborative and often emotional.

Organized in partnership with community groups including the Atlantic Canada Rainbow History Group and the Elderberries, the captioning parties will blend archival work and social gathering, creating space for stories to emerge alongside factual details.



There is also a sense of urgency. Many of the people best able to identify the photographs are aging. Their knowledge risks being lost if it is not captured now.

Beyond preservation, the captioning work has a direct impact on how the collection will be used. As descriptions become richer and more complete, the photographs become more accessible to researchers, educators, students, and the broader public.

“The captioning parties will help improve access to the collection, making these photographs more meaningful and discoverable,” says Barrett.

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For Dal Archives, the project reflects a broader approach to stewardship that recognizes archives as evolving spaces shaped by community participation. Rather than treating records as static, the captioning parties invite those who experienced the history to help define how it is remembered.

In doing so, they ensure that Martinez’s legacy is not only preserved but deepened.



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