

Nova Scotia

Archive brings history of Nova Scotia's aging LGBT community to life

Collection includes newspaper clippings, zines, photos, posters, buttons and personal recordings

[Brooklyn Currie](#) · CBC News · Posted: Dec 29, 2020 6:00 AM AT | Last Updated: 3 hours ago



Jacqueline Gahagan is a health promotion professor. She's also the driving force behind the Nova Scotia LGBT Seniors Archive project at Dalhousie University. (Elizabeth Chiu/CBC)

Researchers at Dalhousie University in Halifax are creating an archive of materials relating to the LGBT community in Nova Scotia dating back to the mid-1900s.

Jacqueline Gahagan, lead researcher on the project, said living in Halifax where there's a naval base and a strong military presence made the creation of the archive even more important

because many LGBT people in that era were kicked out of the military after being outed.

"We have a population of people who have lived their lives facing violence, harassment and even death because of their sexual orientation or gender identity ... but we also have this counter narrative, which is really about all of the amazing contributions that same generation of LGBTQ folks made to economic, social and other advances," she said.

The idea was born in 2017 when [Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized to LGBT Canadians](#) for decades of "state-sponsored, systematic oppression and rejection."



Some of the materials donated to the project include a wide array of pins and buttons from various Halifax Pride events over the years. (NS LGBT Archives)

The collection is a "step in the right direction," Gahagan said, when it comes to reconciling some of the long-standing tensions from the perspective of LGBT people in Nova Scotia.

Gahagan, who's originally from Ontario where she had been very involved in the LGBT movement, moved to Nova Scotia about 20 years ago.

"When I came here, it was kind of like, who are my people?" she said, adding she feels privileged to witness and document this history despite not having lived through it here in Nova Scotia.

'Just one small effort'

Gahagan said for now, the archive focuses on baby boomers because it was their generation that pushed for same-sex marriage, equal rights and recognition. But eventually she'd like to expand the scope.

"[It's] just one small effort to help ensure that we do justice to telling that story while those folks who are from that generation are still with us," she said.



Dan MacKay, a researcher with the project, says he's received hundreds of submitted photos from various LGBT events. Most of them are from the same few photographers who were well known in the community at the time. (NS LGBT Archives)

The small team of researchers has been collecting materials for more than a year, specifically from people born between 1946 and 1964. They only include materials that originated in Nova

Scotia or have a connection to the province.

Some of those materials include newspaper clippings, zines (small, usually online, magazines), photographs, screenplays, audio and video recordings, as well as posters, medals, and buttons from various events.

"The incredible richness in the collection is quite powerful," Gahagan said.

Digital and physical archives

Materials that can be digitized are uploaded to the [searchable online database](#). Things that are hard to digitize, like cloth posters or paintings, will be stored in climate-controlled conditions at Dalhousie University's Killam Library.



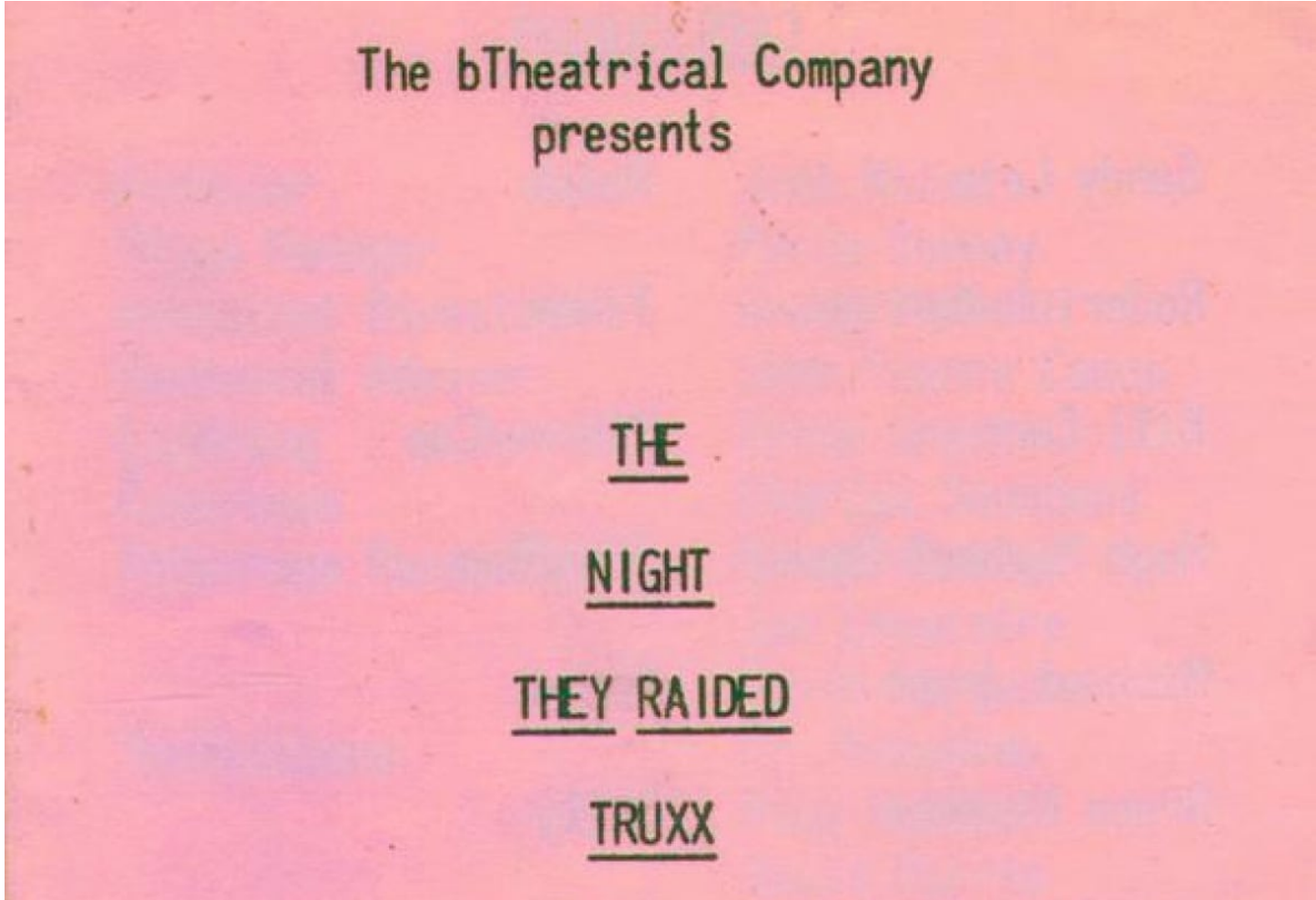
The archive project has received at least a dozen of these Halifax Pride bus posters from 1996. (NS LGBT Archives)

There were some expected materials, like buttons for various Halifax Pride festivals, but it's the unexpected submissions that really excited research assistant Dan MacKay.

One of the most surprising submissions was a set of audio recordings from a 1980s women's chorus called The Secret Furies, most of whom have since retired. MacKay said he didn't think any recordings existed until he got an email from a former member offering up a box of tapes recorded during their practices.

"I'm like, 'Heck yes! This is fantastic. That's something we don't have recordings of at all,'" he said. "And suddenly a batch of recordings just dropped into my lap."

MacKay also received bus posters that had been printed for Halifax Pride in 1996. MacKay, who was involved in the festival at the time, said they printed extra because they expected homophobes to tear them down and destroy them.



The 1978 play *The Night They Raided Truxx* is believed to be one of the first gay plays performed in Canada. (NS LGBT Archives)

"Members of our own community took them down as keepsakes because it was such an amazing thing to have a poster up in the bus," he said.

There was also "absolutely perfect" documentation of an AIDS hospice created in Halifax in the '90s, materials from a lesbian murder mystery, a video of one of the first gay plays performed in Canada — and the list goes on.

Endless possibilities

Duplicates of materials from the archive have already been used by a group of students in the NSCAD Queer Collective for an installation during the Nocturne Halifax art festival.

MacKay said the incredible thing about an archive is there are endless possibilities for putting it to use both now and in the future.



Lynn Murphy, former chair of the Elderberries, is working on the Nova Scotia LGBT Seniors Archive project. (NS LGBT Archives)

"In my imagination, there's a novelist 200 years from now who wants to write a story set in 1985 Halifax. And she goes to the archives ... and she's able to put herself back into what the world was like in Halifax in 1985 in the LGBT community," he said.

The project has received support from the university, and partnered with organizations like Halifax Public Libraries, the Nova Scotia Rainbow Action Project, and the Elderberries social group for LGBTQ Atlantic Canadians over 50.

Funding for the project came from the Nova Scotia Department of Seniors and will run out in March 2021. The group is currently looking for other ways to sustain the archive and continue to grow it.

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