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## The accidental activist

In the 1970s, in a dress shop on Barrington Street, a straight salesperson provides professional and helpful service to Halifax's emerging drag queen population. Is she a gay crusader, or just a decent person? Or are they the same thing?

By **Lezlie Lowe**

This is a story about a size 12 seafoam green evening gown, hanging on a rack, in 1979.

And here's how Marie Rigby, 88, starts the tale: "One day these two fellas come in and they wanted to know if we had any gowns."

Rigby is long retired from women's clothing, and nearly 30 years past her stint as "manageresse" at the Barrington Street location of The House of Bridal Fashions. The two-employee operation, which was one of a variety of locations of this now-closed business, was located at 1569 Barrington, today's Fireworks Gallery.

Anyway, Rigby showed the gowns. "They were looking at this one." It was satin, "kind of crepe-y," she says, with a beaded scoop neckline and spaghetti straps.

"He said, 'Could I ask you a question?'" Rigby remembers. "I didn't know what he was going to ask me. So, he said, 'Could I try it on?' Well!"

Rigby had been told---she doesn't remember by whom, but she knows the thought ran through her head in the moment's pause after this man's request---that she *couldn't* say no. Not couldn't in a moral sense, but legally, or in some vaguely authoritarian way.

But beyond that, she didn't *want* to say no. She was thrown for a loop, no question---"I never knew nothing about them (not gowns, of course, but gay men). I never knew anybody who was gay. That was my first episode."

Still, her instinct wasn't to refuse. "Because they were very nice. They weren't, like, pushy or anything. They were very polite."

Rigby led the man to one of the store's two fitting rooms---round beadboard cubicles halfway to the back on either side. The mirrors inside were small---the kind you'd stick on the back of your bedroom door. The big mirrors---the ones for swirling around in long trained wedding whoppers---were right outside.

The man slid into the size 12 gown. He peeked out. Then he came out. "My god, his shape, I'm tellin' you."

Rigby says the gown, which cost \$125---about half a month's rent in 1979---was perfect. "They were having a big dance or a ball or something.

"I put it in the box with the tissue paper. They thanked me. He said, 'We won't forget you, lady, and we'll tell all our friends about you.' And I thought, 'Oh my Jesus, what am I gettin' into!?"

The next week the pair returned to say "they had a lovely time at the party."

After that, Rigby says, "the fellas from across the street used to come in all the time."

Across the street meant the Khyber Building, which from 1978 to 1983 housed The Turret Social Club, a gay and lesbian dance club and gathering place operated by GAE, the Gay Alliance for Equity.

Admission to The Turret, which comprised virtually the entire third floor and was open five nights a week, cost a signature and a buck. Later that would climb to two bucks and eventually three. For drag shows, members had to lay down \$10.

But boy was it was worth it.

"Good evening and welcome to The Turret."

That's the way host Reg Giles used to start drag shows at the club.

Giles, who's now 57, was at The Turret from its pre-licence days in 1977 until it closed in 1983. He worked the door, the bar, the turntables, the brooms and mops and power tools; he produced and hosted and performed in shows. "I'm a vocalist," though, he says, "not a drag queen." He's also a memoirist, who's produced a sizable online book about the Turret years, at [pbjms.com](http://pbjms.com).

Drag shows would see up to 300 people pack The Turret, sitting around candlelit tables. Performers came from behind a set of red and black curtains (Giles made them: "Wrinkle-free fabric!") onto an elevated thrust that came out from the stage like a runway.

Shows generally happened on long-weekend Sundays---at best every few months. They needed that long between shows, because it took that stretch to prepare for them.

Drag queen Jenny Blake started performing at The Turret in 1980. "I would do two or three numbers at every show," she says.

"It was a night of show and bar and food and dance," Giles says. Admission got you 30 drag numbers, one free drink and a buffet meal which performers and other volunteers home-cooked---roast beef, glazed ham, devilled eggs, salads, cookies...

Giles, as host, wore a tuxedo; drag queens wore formalwear---"Marilyn Monroe-ish," Giles says. "Full-length gowns."

"None of this bra-top bullshit," says Jenny Blake. "You *looked* like something back then."

"Back then," says Giles, "a drag show was a very special event."

Marie Rigby would have loved it. I know without even asking, because Marie Rigby, who'll be 89 in October, is my grandmother.

Marie started selling women's clothing in 1940, the year she got married. She worked at the Gottingen Street mainstays---Heinish's, Klein's and The New York Dress Shop. Later she worked at The House of Bridal Fashions in the Halifax Shopping Centre, and at the Portland Street, Mic Mac Mall and Barrington Street locations.

Marie has always had an eye for a well-put together outfit. It's no wonder she remembers the neckline and trim on that seafoam green evening gown. But it's more than a flair for style. Marie comes from a different time---when people took more care in their appearance and made more effort to fashion themselves into presentability.

I grew up with my grandmother and we are still close. Fashion has been a flashpoint.

My grade six class photo shows a clean-cut kid in a white turtleneck and pink cardigan. By junior high, my bangs grew in a studied parallelogram in front of one eye. I threw bleach on my Levi's and stabbed at the legs with scissors. After the washing machine worked the tears into a white-threaded mess, I safety-pinned them back together.

My grandmother then, and still today, has her hair set once a week. She wears blouses and slacks and knee-highs and she doesn't leave the house without lipstick---Cover Girl Paparazzi Pink. She has moved from pumps to flats, but won't consider sneakers.

In short: Marie has always had more sartorial affiliation with drag queens than with me.

So what happened after the seafoam evening gown episode, if you think about it, only makes sense.

Men would shop for themselves at the store once a week at least, Marie remembers, some buying, some just looking.

"I would help out," she says, "to pick out a blouse, or a pair of slacks or a skirt. I would say, 'Well, this is nice, why don't you try it on and see if you like it?'"

She says she was embarrassed at first. But soon, "they were just like any other customers. They would give me a little wave if I was in the window." Sometimes they would bring her coffee from the Green Lantern.

"I never thought of it as something queer," Marie says. She means out of the ordinary. Not gay. But, actually, it was a whole lot of both.

Robin Metcalfe says being a gay man in Halifax in the '70s and '80s was "exhilarating."

"There was a whole young generation of people who were my age who were claiming space as gays and lesbians."

Metcalf, 56, has lived in Halifax, "with a few side excursions," since he was 16. He got involved in the Gay Alliance for Equity in 1975. GAE began operating The Turret for one-off parties the following year.

These were lofty times. "If you are so much outside the pale of what is normal, it gives you a lot of freedom to invent yourself and to decide what kind of person you want to be, what kind of community you want to be."

Reg Giles, less political but no less involved at the time, says he never found it difficult being a gay man in the '70s and '80s in Halifax. "Except for the fag-basher parts, the nighttime things," he says, "I didn't have a problem with it."

Nevertheless, Giles notes in his memoir that members, in public, said they were going to simply "the club," rather than "The Turret" to avoid being "chastised for being a fag."

Metcalf was attacked and beaten once. The club had death threats and was fire-bombed ("it fizzled"). In the late '70s and early '80s, it was "part of the environment in which we lived and worked. Queer-bashing was fairly common."

And where were police in all this?

At best, late; mostly missing.

Reg Giles says he had no reluctance calling police the rare time they were needed at The Turret and, "once they were there they were professional." But they often took their time arriving. In terms of persecution, "it was subtle."

Gary Kinsman, a professor in the Sociology Department at Laurentian University and Canada's leading authority on queer history, says police turning a blind eye to hostility against gays and lesbians was the norm then. "There's this whole history of, if not legally mandated prejudice and violence, certainly a great amount of toleration of it."

And drag queens, along with butch dykes, says Robin Metcalf, were often first on the receiving line of this violence. "You are talking about a time when both cultures are very much visible in a time when there are no protections, and they bear the brunt of the worst of the homophobia."

"Crossdressing in the context of queer culture is typically understood as subversive," says Todd McCallum, a professor in the Dalhousie History department, "and is targeted for a range of harassing behaviour. Lots of oral histories suggest crossdressers faced trumped-up prostitution or morality charges."

So what about Marie? Was dressing drag queens an unremarkable gesture of common courtesy? Or in the framework of gay acceptance at the time, activism?

Robin Metcalf says "straight but not narrow" didn't exist in Halifax at the time. "The concept had barely been formed."

But in some circumstances, there was acceptance of gay and lesbian culture by heterosexuals.

Condon MacLeod ran a bar on the top floor of the Green Lantern Building from Labour Day 1976 to Labour Day 1977---Saturdays only.

It was, MacLeod says, "a discotheque in the truest sense of the word"---high-gloss white everything, excellent sound system, a bar, a wide dance floor. And it really caught on.

"The Air Canada base had just opened up and so all the stewards and stewardesses would come down to work the bar or work the floor," he says.

The clientele was predominantly gay, but, MacLeod says, "there were married couples that came down. Like, for the wicked music."

There was a restaurant, too, in what's now Brunswick Place, at Cogswell and Brunswick (it used to be named the Trade Mart Building), called The Lobster Trap, which hosted professional drag shows with out-of-town talent. "They would come to The Lobster Trap for largely middle-age, middle-class heterosexual couples who were there for their lobster supper," Metcalfe says.

Some heterosexuals found this bumping up against homosexual counter-culture tolerable because it was titillating and, crucially, fleeting. "People like the boundary being pushed," Metcalfe says, "if they know they are going to their safe family home at the end of the evening."

Dalhousie's Todd McCallum gives other examples of how drag was (and still is) OK in dominant culture. "Frat boys in dresses don't tend to undermine binary ways of thinking about gender and sexuality. Halloween is another example: crossdressing is allowed because, many argue, it ends up reinforcing dominant beliefs about gender and sex."

Context, then, is everything. Gender-bending practices in clubs and bars in the '70s was tolerated, "perhaps in terms of culture and in terms of art," says Laurentian's Gary Kinsman, but not on the streets.

The House of Bridal Fashions was halfway between the stage and the street; conceptually similar to the legality of cross-dressing at the time.

"Men dressing in women's clothing was illegal in the '50s, and by the '70s it would have been grey area. I don't think your grandmother would have been at risk," Metcalfe says, "but she wouldn't have been very far away from a zone where there might have been risk involved."

Still, she wasn't the only one.

Reg Giles from The Turret says lots of drag queens used to shop at Nikki Lounsbury's Barrington Place dress store, Mona Lisa. And Jenny Blake (who still performs at Menz Bar on Gottingen) used to use retail fitting rooms without incident at Fairweather, Dalmys and The New York Dress Shop: "You would get a few strange looks."

Kristi Davidson is a 26-year-old drag performer who took to the stage in 2007.

"I started out at the Sears Bargain Basement," she says, because "not a whole lot of people shop there." Today? "Let's look in the closet...hmmm...Le Chateau, Fairweather, the regular Sears, some thrift stores..." Davidson calls Spree her

favourite---"like drag queen heaven." She buys her size 11 pumps at Payless, or Night Magic Fashions.

But Davidson generally doesn't try on retail clothing in stores. "It's a comfort thing. I guess it all boils down to the fact that my parents don't know I do drag," says the former Mz. Gay Halifax. "They know me, but they may not know that aspect of me."

She has tried on clothes in the fitting room at Debut on Spring Garden Road, but not without reluctance the first time. "I bit the bullet and said, OK: I'm looking for a dress...that will fit me."

Davidson says the salesperson "wasn't fazed at all; she was so helpful." She ended up buying a size 16 iridescent blue evening gown with sweetheart neckline and beaded bust for \$250.

Sounds familiar.

Can you be an accidental activist? And was that what my grandmother was?

Marie had no financial motivation to dress drag queens because she was paid hourly. Her interactions with the queens didn't fit the standard mould of heterosexual titillation. And, to be clear: it wasn't about morals.

Marie wasn't helping a *man* buy a dress that first time; she was helping a *customer* buy a dress.


When I asked her why she did it, she gave the same answer she did when I asked her why she spent her entire adult life selling dresses: because she loved to see people happy with something they bought: "the look on their face. That made me really pleased."


"What I remember most of all," says Marie about her time on Barrington Street, "is that evening gown. True as god, I can still see him standing there. He was a blond fella."


Later, when she got to see him all the time, she says, "He called me Marie."



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