

Conference Declared Success



By Sean McLennan

In spite of our current government's leanings on social issues and some notable absences of our Prime Minister, this past summer Canada made a respectable show of leadership on the international stage. We hosted both the XVI International AIDS Conference (August 13 - August 18) in Toronto, as well as the first World Outgames (July 26 - August 5) in Montréal. One might question whether or not sporting events count as "tackling global social problems" (one might counter that the spirit of friendly competition fosters international cooperation and good will), but the organizing body of the Outgames—the Gay and Lesbian International Sport Association (GLISA) — added a component to their program that removes all doubt. The Outgames included an International Conference on GLBT Human Rights in conjunction with the sporting and cultural events (July 26-29).

A major event in its own right, the Outgames conference this year was the largest of its kind ever held and is one of the distinguishing features of the Outgames compared to the similarly structured Gay Games which were held in Chicago just a couple of weeks earlier. In addition to the quadrennial World Outgames, GLISA is organizing continental Outgames for intervening years; each will be similarly structured with a GLBT human rights conference of continental scope. Pairing the games and the conferences in this manner helps support attendance and visibility for both, while simultaneously establishing the structure and continuity to make a real contribution. In short, it's a stroke of genius.

All told, the World Outgames drew 18,599 participants between staff, volunteers, athletes, officials, performers, and conference attendees and drew a further 500,000 spectators. The conference itself had over 1,500 participants in an overwhelming forty simultaneous streams of workshops on global LGBT issues. Obviously, no one could attend all of the 200 some-odd sessions held over the three days of the conferences so the conference was organized into five themes: Essential Rights, Global Issues, the Diverse GLBT Community, Participation in Society, Creating Social Change. Additionally, there were two sub-conferences—Workers Out!, Out for Business!—two more workshop streams—Out in Sport and Out in the World—and one plenary session for each of the five themes.

For a first time conference, such a strenuous programming schedule is ambitious indeed; however, according to Vong Sundara, a Calgarian Outgames athlete (badminton) and conference observer, the event was incredibly well organized. He maintained "observer" status because he is on the organizational committee of the conference to be held at the first North American Outgames in Calgary in April 2007. As an observer, he had "behind-the-scenes" access to the organizational activities of the conference. Vong says that how the 5,200 volunteers were organized and treated was especially impressive—subtleties like the fact that volunteers registered with the athletes emphasized their importance to the event—and that he learned a lot that he can put use at Calgary's conference.

Another Calgarian, Melissa Luhtanen, who is a Human Rights Educator with the Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre, attended the conference as a presenter. She welcomed the opportunity to share some of the work that she's been doing in Calgary through the Safety Under the Rainbow project, addressing issues of violence against and within the GLBT community such as bullying and same-sex domestic violence. Particularly the latter is not a widely acknowledged or studied issue that has now had broader exposure thanks to the conference. Personally, however, Melissa found the most value from being surrounded by so many queer and queer-positive people. For the first time she really felt like being gay was normalized—everywhere you went straight people were the minority and the

straight people that were there were gay-friendly. Although you get the same sort of feeling hanging out in the gaybourhood, it was significantly different because of the scale—there were thousands and thousands of people.

Edward Lee, another Calgary athlete, echoed that same sentiment. For him, the conference and the games were remarkable for the visibility of their participants. Even outside the venues, it was not uncommon to see ID tags, backpacks, clothing and other paraphernalia that marked individuals as connected to the games. Instead of feeling isolated as GLBT people so often do, it was easy to recognize the kinship of the strangers around you—and that was a powerful feeling. For Ed, the feeling extended beyond that as well—he found the entire city welcoming to the event and the participants and tells an anecdote of how even an elderly woman—just a random stranger on the metro—smiled at him and gave him the thumbs up when she noticed he was part of the games.

Melissa, Ed and Vong all noted the Open Ceremonies, which marked the conclusion of the human rights conference and the opening of the sporting events as a highlight. The conference participants marched into the stadium with the athletes and Melissa said that the experience of being cheered by 30,000 queer and queer-friendly people was overwhelming—something that every GLBT person should have the opportunity to experience. It really brought home to her how much of a force the GLBT community is, and how much power we do have. All of them returned to Calgary renewed, inspired, and itching to ignite that spirit in others.

One concrete outcome of the conference was the Declaration of Montréal, which will be presented to the United Nations and national governments worldwide to spur the mobilization of resources to address global GLBT human rights issues. The introduction to the Declaration reads:

'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.' This famous first sentence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted almost sixty years ago by the General Assembly of the United Nations, contains in a nutshell our political agenda, as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, transitioned and intersexual persons.

The world has gradually accepted that individual human beings have different sexes, racial or ethnic origins, and religions, and that these differences must be respected and not be used as reasons for discrimination. But most countries still do not accept two other aspects of human diversity: that people have different sexual orientations and different gender identities; that two women or two men can fall in love with each other; and that a person's identity, as female or male or neither, is not always determined by the type of body into which they were born.

It goes on to layout a framework for the protection of LGBT people. It declares that we have protection against state-sanctioned and hate-based violence; that we have freedom of expression, association; that we the right to do what we please with our bodies—even just to have sex! (Remember it's still illegal in much of the world, in some cases carrying the death penalty.) It continues to focus on some key areas—education, safe environments and gaining recognition of same-sex partnerships. The co-presidents of the conference, Joke Zweibel and Robert Winternute, stated that the Declaration of Montréal represents the next frontier in the battle for human rights.

Canada is clearly distinguishing itself as a world leader in GLBT issues and the momentum appears to be gathering. With the first continental Outgames also to be held in Canada—in Calgary next April—our role in originating this important international event will not soon be forgotten—especially if Canadians continue to be on the driving edge of global issues. ▼

glisa.org montreal2006.org calgary2007.org aclrc.com sutr.ca

Photos from the Conference by Melissa Luhtanen

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