



By Sean McLennan

April 1 through 8, 2007, Calgary will play host to the first North American Outgames—the regional equivalent of the World Outgames, the first of which was held in Montréal last summer. The Gay and Lesbian International Sport Association (GLISA), the governing body of the Outgames, has granted the bid to the newly created Calgary Outgames Legacy (COL) to coordinate. Although each event will be independently run by local volunteers and organizations, each Outgames has the same basic structure with three core elements: sport, culture/celebration, and a human rights conference. Consequently, “Outgames” is really composed of three companion events: Outgames, Outfest, and Outrights. These latter two components are one of the major distinguishing features of the Outgames, compared to the Gay Games, which was also held last summer and has a slightly longer history. More importantly, Outfest and Outrights significantly expand the intention and interest of the Outgames into something that draws more attention and will ultimately have a broader social impact.

Calgary was chosen to host the first Outgames in part to honour the twenty-fifth anniversary of Apollo’s Western Cup (the world’s oldest running multi-sport GLBT athletic event!) with which it will be amalgamated this year. Rather than trying to coordinate such a massive effort on its own, COL has taken a divide and conquer approach, tapping into the expertise that already exists in our community; Apollo will run the sporting component, while Outfest has been delegated to the Fairytales Presentation Society and Outrights to AIDS Calgary.

Culturally, we have much more background for this kind of sporting event in Calgary: the Olympics, the Western Cup... but Outfest and Outrights will be something unique for our community and require a little more exposition.

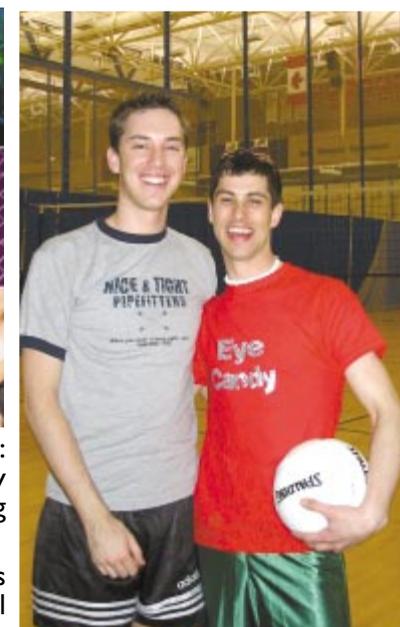
Outfest extends over the entire week of the Outgames and promises to be one heck of a party! There are already more than fifty-five events and performances planned—that’s an average of seven or eight a day! Fairytales, which is, of course, well known for running the Fairytales International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival each year, has a long range goal of being known as one of Calgary’s main cultural organizations and Outfest is a major stepping stone to achieving that goal. Far from sticking to the silver screen, they are pulling together events that span the full spectrum of the arts including drama, film, music, visual arts, spoken word and even comedy.

The Epcor Centre came on board early as a sponsor and will act as “Gay Central” for the week—Stephen Avenue has been dubbed the “Rainbow Mile” as many of the events will be located there or in the vicinity. Proposed performances include an organ concert conducted by Jim Picken, Queer Conscience—an evening of spoken word hosted by the Calgary Spoken Word Society, and an evening with the Calgary Men’s Chorus and guests. Planned performances will include local artists and North American award winning artists alike. Gallery exhibitions will occur at a variety of venues including the Calgary Art Gallery, the Triangle Gallery, and Art Central. That doesn’t even touch on Fairytales’ expertise—film, or on theatre... And then there’s the parties: nightly team-hosted gatherings, dances and, of course, the Outgames Ceremonies.

The emphasis of the Outgames is participation rather than just spectatorship. Along those lines a major Outfest event will be a Digital Arts Competition, which will accept submissions from across North America. A jury will select the best art, which will be purchased by Outfest for as much as \$5000. Similarly, other groups who want to arrange events are encouraged to do so—already several youth events are scheduled. The approach guarantees that everyone will find something to please.

Kelly Ernst, one of the Outfest organizers and one of the eight COL board members, says that their next big step is sponsorship. Fairytales is committed to not going into deficit to run the event, which will rely primarily on ticket sales. Their goal is to try and keep the cost of attending all the events of the week under \$250 dollars. Sponsorship will be a big help in meeting that goal—as will volunteers! Outfest is ripe with opportunities to help out and interested individuals are encouraged to get in contact. All told, about 10,000 people are expected to be involved in Outfest.

Part of Fairytales’ reason for making the event fiscally viable is that the inten-



tion is that Outfest launches a yearly event: The Gay and Lesbian Cultural Festival. They see Outfest as being a key step in promoting Calgary as a creative and open city.

Building on the success of the Outrights conference that was part of the Montréal Outgames, the Calgary Outrights conference, on April 2 and 3, will be similarly structured into themes.

The first theme, “Creating Social Change”, will discuss how to combat the stigma and discrimination that continue to undermine the wellbeing of the GLBT community in North America. Questions about what policies and actions not only foster immediate change but foster sustainable and continuing change, will be explored as well as emphasizing that, in addition to government, business also plays an important role enacting social change.

The second theme, “Essential Rights”, will focus on the fact that sexual orientation is rarely included in human rights legislation—a particularly apropos theme for Alberta, which still does not explicitly include sexual orientation in our legislation. Important discussions will include how these rights weather changes in the political climate, and how stigma and discrimination allow the perpetuation of human rights violations and undermine consistent enforcement of the law.

The third theme, “Health”, will face the discrimination that GLBT communities face in terms of access to and provision of health care services, as well as how social determinants like homophobia contribute to higher than average rates of depression, drug dependence and HIV/AIDS infection.

Finally, the fourth theme, “Inclusion Within”, takes an introspective look at our own communities and how they do or do not recognize our own diversity. Factors like age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, able-bodiedness, religious affiliation and marital status in some cases continue to be divisive. How we can make use of our strengths and diversity to understand what it means to be part of a growing, diverse and influential community will be discussed.

The final product of the Montréal Outrights conference was a document—the “Declaration of Montréal”, which was presented and circulated to governments and organizations worldwide. Similarly, this year’s conference intends to produce the “Calgary Blueprint for Action” which will be a template that can be applied to or used by any community within a North American context.

Susan Cress, the director of AIDS Calgary and another COL board member, says that the document will be an interesting challenge to put together because of the variety of political climates, laws, and primary issues that communities face even just within North America. However, they are committed to putting together something that will be a useful tool for grass-roots organizations, especially in more rural areas. Susan believes that people are primed to understand diversity—it’s a matter of giving them the right context and arguments. Especially for the corporate world—if they can be made to see the business case for [accepting/promoting] diversity, they’ll be convinced by the economics. The timing of Outrights and its message is serendipitous, coming at the outset of new provincial leadership as it does.

The conference organizers anticipate upwards of 500 participants and have an open call for presentation abstracts. Of course, Outrights is also eager to hear from interested volunteers.

The center for Calgary Outgames info is the website: calgary2007.com where you will be able to register, volunteer, and find finalized schedules.

For Calgary, hosting the first North American Outgames is not just an honour, but it is an event that will provide the city with unprecedented opportunities for growth. This is the view of the Calgary Outgames Legacy—they perceive the Outgames not as a one-time event, but the beginning of a process to develop the Calgarian commitment to diversity and openness, such that Calgary continues to be a leader in Alberta, Canada and the world in the fight for equality and human rights. ▼

Sean McLennan is a native Calgarian with (nearly) a PhD in Linguistics and Cognitive Science from Indiana University, where he was heavily involved in GLBT education. He currently has a full time gig in software for mobile technology.