



# Gay on the Prairies (And Other Far-Flung Places)

Filmmakers explore queer life in sparsely-populated hinterlands

by Stephen LaRose

There's the stereotypical story that any editor assigns to a reporter about gay life and small town North America. The reporter is expected to come back with a story about The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name: a small, persecuted community where people remain deep in the closet because they fear being ostracized or beaten.

The authors of three documentaries about small town gay life aren't co-operating for various reasons.

One of them is Malcolm Ingram, a Toronto-based independent film maker who's made *Small Town Gay Bar*, a look at two gay and lesbian clubs in rural Mississippi, the people who go to them, and the bigots and religious zealots who (in pre-Rev. Ted Haggard days, at least) want to see them and their families run out of town on a rail. The movie received much critical hoopla at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah.

Alas, Ingram has thwarted all interview overtures. Movin' on...

Unlike Ingram, Tori Foster regularly checks her e-mail, and had the

good grace to honour this scribe with a chat.

Foster, the pride of Barrie, Ontario (a bedroom community outside of Toronto), wasn't interested in doing that clichéd "coming out" story, either. Her movie, *533 Statements*, is a cross-Canada road trip to record a snap-shot of gay and lesbian life in Canada. Foster says she fought against putting in coming-out stories until making the final cut.

"I realized that I was cutting off my nose to spite my face," she says in an interview from Toronto. "I had to include some great footage that I had compiled on it."

Though she now lives in Canada's biggest metropolitan centre, small-town values and gay life is a familiar topic for the 20-something filmmaker.

"I grew up in Barrie, which had a population of about 75,000 when I was growing up. The community was non-existent for queer people at the time," she says. "In order to meet other people like me, I would come down to Toronto, and get on the internet, and meet people that way."

"The documentary is an extension of my childhood and youth, in that I wanted to go out and meet other

people like me."

"The biggest difference between (being gay in) Barrie and Toronto is what I would call 'indifference towards differences,'" she adds. "If I'm being public about my sexuality, I would not be as concerned about my personal welfare as I would be in a really small..."

"I have to catch myself," she continues. "It's not an issue of smallness. It's an issue of their awareness of sexual issues and cultural attitudes and acceptances. You could have a small city, like Charlottetown, and they're quite accepting of queer people. I have met people from Sudbury and they tell me that it's horrible (for gays and lesbians), and the communities are the same size."

*533 Statements* is a tapestry of 25 women she interviews during the cross-Canada trip. (She interviewed two Regina's; one made the final cut.)

"It was a forum for them to tell their own stories and to hear the stories of others," says Foster, who's created a number of documentaries during and after his academic career at Ryerson University in Toronto, where she graduated in 2005.

She wasn't interested in The Big

Story of Being a Lesbian in Canada, Foster says, because each person had their own stories, and it would be impossible to believe that the women she interviewed—from Mission, B.C. to Montreal to Guelph—spoke for all in her community or in their nation. Different people not only have different experiences, she says, they also see the same experience differently.

Rather than travel across Canada looking for stories, Regina's David Geiss finds his stories at home. He's made tentative plans for a film biography of Doug Wilson, who became an unexpected leader in Canada's gay rights movement in the 1970s. In 1975 Wilson, who grew up on a rural Saskatchewan farm, placed an ad in *The Sheaf*, the University of Saskatchewan student newspaper, to start an organization for gays and lesbians on campus.

"Somebody saw it, he was suspended, there were lawsuits, and he became the poster boy for the gay rights movement in Saskatchewan at that time," Geiss says. "I'm drawn to the story because of that. He moved to Toronto. He was an artist, a writer, he got into politics...I've done a lot of work on it, but I'm at the point of

trying to get funding."

Meanwhile, he'll be showing his documentary *Queen City* at the festival. It came to life two years ago, when he was a student at the University of Regina's film school, and started it as a 15-minute documentary that filled a class requirement.

"Everyone who watched that loved it and said they wanted to see more," he says. "So I decided to make a longer version of it and spent two years putting it together."

The festival organizers have slotted *Queen City* to run in the same showing as small town gay bar, "I guess, because they wanted the theme of small town gay experiences," Geiss says. But when talking about his adopted home town (he was born in rural Saskatchewan), Geiss sounds more like a diplomat than a gay man who once shared his community with the notorious Bill Whatcott.

**"There's been comments like, 'oh you're gay and in Regina? Why don't you move to Toronto or Vancouver?'"**

"I feel safe here. It's my home here. A lot of my friends are here," he says.

"There's been comments like, 'oh you're gay and in Regina? Why don't you move to Toronto or Vancouver? You're obviously not happy here,'" he continues. "Then again there are people who say to me, 'you're in film? Then why aren't you in Vancouver?'"

If he was in Vancouver, Geiss wouldn't have been able to make *Queen City*, which "is about drag queens in Regina, as opposed to being gay in Regina," he says. "Though there's some interconnectedness, and some parallels between the two."

"Whenever I would mention drag queens and Regina, the reaction was, 'I didn't know there are drag queens in Regina,' but obviously there are," Geiss adds.

"It's sort of low key. I wanted to promote them without making it into a promotional film or being exploitative. They do a lot of charity work."

"The other thing is that none of them are paid performers. All the work they do is for charity, and they donate their tips to whatever causes they're interested in." These include the Gay and Lesbian Community of Regina (GLCR), a southern Saskatchewan AIDS outreach program, and a hospital palliative care unit.

"When I shot the film a couple of years ago, the drag queens were very good at what they did. One comment I got from people who were familiar with the drag scenes in other cities was that the ones in Regina were very beautiful, the one in other cities weren't exactly pretty."

Geiss entered *Queen City* at the Canadian Youth Film Festival in Ottawa last April, where it won the award for best documentary. "Here, a lot of people who have seen it either don't want to offend me or the people in the movie, or maybe they know somebody in the film, so that's one reason why I haven't heard any negative comments," he concludes.

The documentary will also be aired on SCN on Nov. 23. 