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Topic of presentation is the transfer of memory between generations at Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives

My background is in communications in the non-profit and credit union sectors.

I also participate as an ad-hoc member of the Community Engagement Committee of the CLGA – as a relatively new volunteer this was a great learning experience.

Presentation is based on a paper written for Dr. Eric Ketelaar's class in 2011 on Archives and Collective Memory.

Paper was an open-ended and high level exploration of ways that LGBT community memory is being transferred between community members at the CLGA, including success factors for this transfer and strategies being employed.

## Thanks to

- Alan Miller, Serials Archivist, CLGA
- Roberta Wiseman, CLGA Volunteer, Thursday research night
- Community Engagement Committee members:
  - Rebecka Sheffield
  - Kate Zieman
  - Mike Voikins
  - Rachel Beattie

The goal of the research was to hear feedback about the transfer of memory from the perspective of long-time volunteers who hold a great deal of community and CLGA memory, and from relatively newer or younger volunteers who are receiving those memories.

I conducted semi-structured, open-ended exploratory interviews with Alan Miller, Serials Archivist, CLGA and Rebecka Sheffield, Community Engagement Committee volunteer and PhD candidate at the iSchool, UofT.

A brief email questionnaire was circulated to members of the Community Engagement Committee and young volunteers working on Alan Miller's research night. I received 4 responses. The Community Engagement Committee was selected as a relatively younger group within the organization. Questions included: how have you received information about CLGA and queer community history, do you feel a sense of responsibility in receiving those memories and what keeps you engaged, what types of records are most evocative? I also consulted CLGA website, blog and academic material on collective memory

It is interesting to look at CLGA right now as the organization appears to be in a period of growth.



St. Charles Tavern, Toronto

Photo: CLGA Community Engagement Blog, <http://clgaengagement.blogspot.ca/2012/04/st-charles-tavern.html>

Before background about CLGA, a quick story from the CLGA community blog: The picture on the slide is of the St. Charles Tavern, a popular gay bar in Toronto in the 1970s. The tavern was subject to many homophobic attacks, especially at Halloween when the tavern held an annual drag contest that included an outdoor promenade on Yonge Street.

Rebecka of the Community Engagement Committee posted this photo and asked people to share their memories of the tavern.

An amazing set of comments came back from someone who shared their memories of going to the bar at Halloween 1978 as a young man. There was an angry mob across the street and police on horseback were trying to keep people back on the other side of the street. The anger was so extreme, he was so afraid as a visibly gay man he had to leave.

I tell this brief story:

- It shows the blog is a great venue for the transfer of memories
- This event took place just down the street from where CLGA is now so visibly located
- Queer life in Canada has changed - it's by no means perfect but trauma is continuing in less obvious ways. The community perspective places more emphasis



CLGA, 34 Isabella Street, Toronto

Photo: CLGA Community Engagement Blog, <http://clgaengagement.blogspot.ca/2011/05/doors-open-toronto-2011.html>

- CLGA second largest LGBT archive in the world - founded in 1973
- Largest queer periodical collection
- Located on Isabella St in Toronto's gay village area
- Original core fonds is of the Body Politic, a Canadian gay liberation journal of record from 1971 to 1987.
- Independent registered charity with Board of Directors
- 1 paid General Manager position
- Pool of volunteers and committees – archival work, PR/marketing, community engagement, exhibitions, finance, fundraising etc.
- Moved into a new location in 2009. The House was donated to CLGA by Children's Aid Society in a deal brokered by then city councilor Kyle Rae.
- It was completely renovated by CLGA, floors were reinforced etc.
- It includes a community meeting room, gallery space
- The house provides a much more accessible setting for community outreach, opening doors for greater visibility.

## What is CLGA's Mission?

- “aspires to be a significant resource and catalyst for those who strive for a future world where lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people are accepted, valued and celebrated” (CLGA Mission)
- “aid in the recovery and preservation of our histories...give public access to information...by and about LGBT people, primarily produced in or concerning Canada” (CLGA Mandate)

Maurice Halbwachs, the sociologist known for developing the concept of collective memory said that “The present generation becomes conscious of itself in counterposing its present to its own constructed past”

In the same way, Rebecka Sheffield said in her interview that “LGBT youth are like anthropologists trying to find a history of queer – the archive becomes a touchstone for their own stories.”

A “communal reservoir of stories”, it is important to note that while CLGA remains neutral in relation to community activism, it is by its existence a politically based archive.

It’s mission is to be a “catalyst” for a better world and the language “for those who strive” indicates an openness to be accessible to anyone interested in lesbian and gay history.

## To be or not to be independent?



Photo: BlogTO, [http://www.blogto.com/city/2010/06/inside\\_the\\_lesbian\\_and\\_gay\\_archives/](http://www.blogto.com/city/2010/06/inside_the_lesbian_and_gay_archives/)

Part of my paper looked at the kind of organizational factors that support a community based archives like CLGA to be effective in keeping stories alive. First of these is whether to be independent or join with a larger archival or library institution – big question for queer archives.

### **Benefits of being independent**

- Barriers between amateur and professional archivists is removed
- The volunteers have the subject knowledge to properly interpret the collection

### **Challenges**

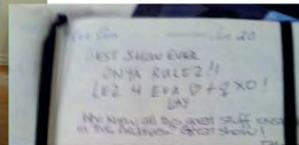
- Financial stresses
- Lack of professional skills and facilities to house collections properly

CLGA has chosen to remain a community based organization.

Obtaining charitable status has helped CLGA to fundraise and survive financially.

At one point CLGA thought about renting space at University of Toronto. But only professional staff would be able to work with the material there, whereas at CLGA half the volunteers already have archival or library training and are contributing significant professional time. The donation of the house made the final decision for the time – I would argue that in terms of accessibility it's the right one, providing quick access to collection, and street level visibility in the gay village.

## Diversity of voices



Photos: Lez Con Robyn Hall, Rupert Raj, Toronto.ca <http://www.toronto.ca/civicawards/2007winners.htm>

The queer communities are very diverse. To engage and be open to receiving community memory, people need to see themselves in the records.

The core CLGA material has historically had a greater emphasis on records related to gay male history with opportunities over the years to expand coverage of women, cultural diversity within the community and trans people among others.

There are challenges in having the resources to process all accessions that would increase the diversity of the collection.

Recent activities of interest:

Funding was allocated to process the donated papers of transgendered activist Rupert Raj.

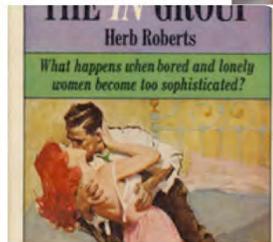
Lez Con: an exhibition by Onya-Hogan Finlay March/April 2012, had the goal to “unearth the Lesbian representation in the archives” – guest book comments show great response

to exhibit “Best Show Ever” “Who knew this great stuff existed in the archives”

There is a growing group of collecting organizations of LGBT archival material in Canada.

## External Strategies: Community Engagement & Exhibitions

- Presentations
- Exhibitions
- Social media
- Ephemera works



Other area of the paper looked at external strategies for transferring memories going on at CLGA:

**Presentations** in high schools and other community settings.

Regular presentation requests from a variety of groups

There is an opportunity to be an educational resource to gay-straight alliance clubs and anti-homophobia educational programs in public high schools in Ontario (Zieman)

Challenge - time consuming for a volunteers to prepare and deliver

Solution – online resources, semi-permanent queer history exhibit

**Exhibitions** – since opening of gallery in house, very ambitious exhibit schedule

Exhibition launches bring community out – great way to share stories

**Social Media** - Blog, Facebook, Twitter, refreshed website

St. Charles Tavern story really shows the Blog in action –

Must have for engagement of Gen Y

### **Ephemera**

Queer archives are sites of intimate memories. Anne Cvetkovich says lesbian history demands a radical archive of emotion to document intimacy, sexuality, love and activism – preserving feeling

LGBT archives are very heavily weighted toward ephemera and personal narratives, diaries

CLGA – buttons, posters, artefacts, t-shirts, banners

This material has been successfully used by CLGA in youth presentations

## Internal Strategy: Volunteer Mentoring



Photo: CLGA Community Engagement blog [http://clgaengagement.blogspot.ca/2010\\_06\\_01\\_archive.html](http://clgaengagement.blogspot.ca/2010_06_01_archive.html)

The other way I observed memory being transferred at CLGA is internal - through volunteer - to - volunteer memory sharing - between long-time and newer volunteers. In a small community based archives, especially a political one, this takes on great importance.

The younger volunteers who responded to the questionnaire came to CLGA for a variety of reasons:

- Involvement in queer studies
- Interest in volunteering in queer community
- As library/archives students and professionals
- To bring more awareness of CLGA to broader queer communities
- Through friends and to meet friends
- To encourage more young people, women and trans people to donate and volunteer

In terms of long-term volunteers, Alan Miller is one of five core CLGA volunteers who have been involved for approximately 30 years each. Obviously their collective organizational and community memory is massive. Miller related that two of the five have had major health issues recently, and they are all informally developing five-year succession plans for their area of responsibility. Not that they are planning to go anywhere, but Miller says that they are very conscious of the knowledge they have in their heads.

His personal strategies to share that include: putting more of his knowledge in the database  
And activities that can be called volunteer mentoring:

## Oral transmission of memory



Photo: CLGA website, <http://www.clga.ca/npc/>

In fact, when I asked some of the younger volunteers how they received information about CLGA and queer history, the majority said they learned the most through casual conversations with long-time volunteers and one-on-one training.

- One said: “A lot of information has been given to me via casual conversations with other volunteers at the archives. There's gaps in knowledge but there's so much history to learn - it's gonna take some time y'all.”
- Another shared: “Recently there was a photo of participants from a Toronto Gay Historian conference from the early 80s and Alan was able to tell us young one’s everyone’s name, a brief bio and quite poignantly, who had died from AIDS – I felt like it was a photo of Edwardians before they went off to be killed in WWI. Moments like this...bonds us as a group of friends and as a community.”
- And a third said: “I learned most of what I know about the CLGA through conversations with Robert Windrum and Clifford Collier (who trained me for the rare books project, and passed away last year). The website is also a valuable tool. As for queer community history, I've learned a lot preparing presentations and doing research for different things (exhibitions, articles for outside publications, etc.)... Casual conversations with older volunteers like Alan have taught me a lot...”

CLGA does not have a formal volunteer orientation program, which makes one-on-one mentoring all that more valuable. (along with other resources and experiences like the website, learning through giving tours, presentations and other projects.)

This points in two directions – one around oral history and the other organizational

## Succession planning principles

- Begin planning now
- Know where your archives is going
- Use size to advantage
- “Hire” for the future/”hire” for abilities
- Encourage long-term commitment
- Promote archives as a great place to be

Whitwell, V (2005). Workforce and Succession Planning in Special Libraries. *Felicitas*, 51(3), 135.

This leads naturally to the area of succession planning. This is not about volunteers leaving, but consciously transferring memories, leadership development among the volunteers and encouraging long-term commitment to the organization.

A search of articles on succession planning in archives found nothing – the library world has some material.

Leave these as a takeaway...

**Start now** – at CLGA health scares were the motivation - it’s good to begin before that happens

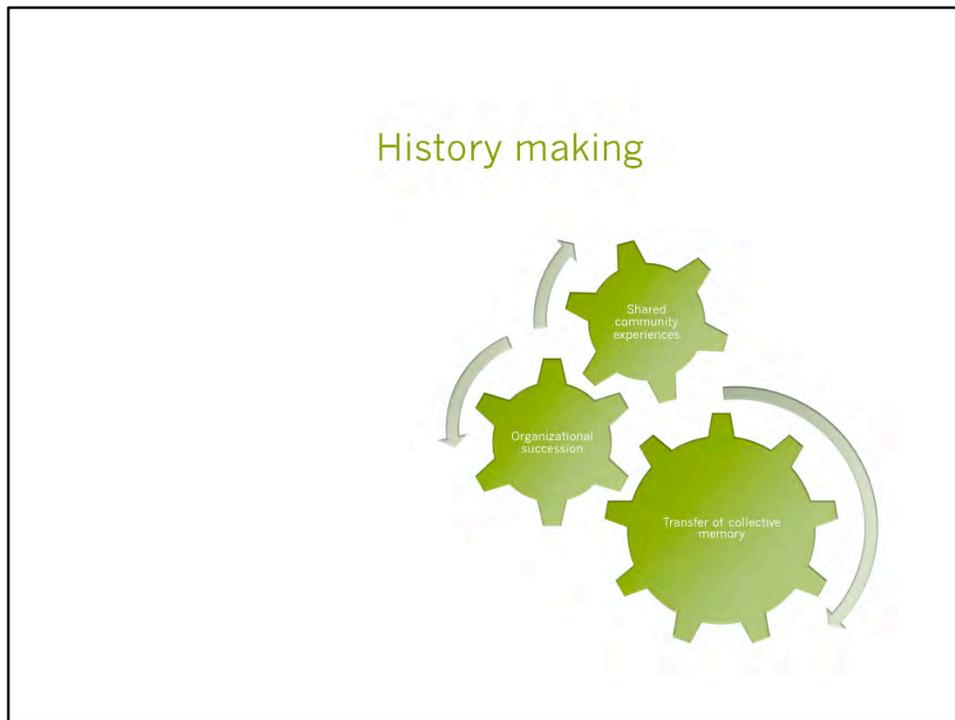
**Strategic vision** – where is your path and what volunteer and human resource approaches will support that journey?

**Use size to advantage** – gen x and gen y enjoy working in small flat organizations

**Recruit for abilities** –look for abilities (leadership, flexibility, potential) more than technical skills, which can be learned

**Encourage long-term commitment** – Mentoring is important

**Promote your archives** – to attract volunteers



This very exploratory project uncovered for me an interesting conflation of collective memory research, organizational succession and archival outreach strategies for creating shared community experience.

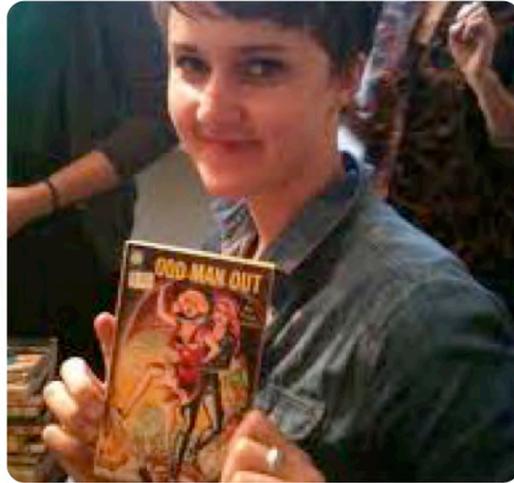
Margaret Hedstrom notes that “Rather than conflating archives and collective memory, archivists could build a more compelling case for the social value of archives by enumerating and investigating the conditions and circumstances where archives are instrumental in forming, reviving, or transmitting a sense of shared experience”

Shared community experiences tell stories and engage younger queers – whether its exhibits, blog, volunteering, mentoring.

In turn it’s those younger volunteers who will eventually safeguard the collection and keep CLGA viable as an organization.

CLGA holds official historical information, but its heart is the 21<sup>st</sup> century activity of using of personal memory to comprehend and make traumatic events visible - as well as remembering the happy and fun stuff.

Andrew Flinn notes that success comes from engaging youth in the process of history making as well as history learning.



Thank You! Questions?

I want to end by going back to the Lez Con exhibit – a good example of this process.

The artist Onya Hogan-Finlay had a group of women into the archives, many in 20s and 30s. The artists did a similar project at the ONE gay and lesbian archives in LA.

They interacted with lesbian content in the archives and did a photo shoot of women with the pulp fiction collection.

People who may not visit the archives every day see something of themselves in records and can incorporate that into their own version of queer history.

Shared experience with the collection, targeting a historically less represented group in the archives, attracting people who could be the future of the organization, and building some sense of collective memory from there.

I asked the volunteers in the questionnaire about their commitment and sense of responsibility to the archives they almost uniformly said they were committed to continuing with their volunteering and felt a sense of responsibility for the stories they had learned....

For CLGA the new house, digital activities, mentoring, show that the transfer of

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