

MHR *Connections*

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THE MANITOBA
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DU MANITOBA

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Gay Pride Day in Winnipeg



Rain didn't dampen the spirit of Gay Pride Day. The free concert attracted thousands of Manitobans and visitors.

Manitoba Human Rights Commission Supports Bill

Looks Forward to Further Amendments

Winnipeg - The Manitoba Human Rights Commission is pleased that the Manitoba Government has introduced legislation allowing same-sex couples to adopt. "We urged the Government last year to amend a number of statutes, including The Adoption and Vital Statistics Acts," said Janet Baldwin, Commission Chairperson. "All families ought to have the same rights and responsibilities, and we are pleased that this Bill addresses some of the remaining inequities faced by same-sex common-law partners."

Ms Baldwin said, however, that as much as the Commission supports the amendments, it is disappointed that this Bill did not address some other significant issues. Property laws determining the division of property on the breakdown of a relationship or the death of a spouse are not yet amended to include common-law partners, whether of the opposite or same-sex. The Intestate Succession Act is also not included in the Bill. "We are pleased, however, that the Government is committed to dealing with these important issues during this session," she added.

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The Rights Connection

By Janet Baldwin, Chairperson

A month ago Dianna Scarth, our Executive Director, and I attended the 30th Annual Conference of the Canadian Association of Statutory Human Rights Agencies (CASHRA) in Prince Edward Island. CASHRA is a national organization of provincial, territorial and federal human rights commissions. As well as sponsoring an annual conference to address current human rights issues, CASHRA is increasingly speaking out on national human rights issues. Last year the B.C. Chief Commissioner was President of CASHRA but felt compelled to resign in view of the impending demise of the B.C. Human Rights Commission. The Manitoba Commission was asked to take over as President and Treasurer for this year.

The theme of the PEI Conference was "Human Rights at Work," featuring Nancy Rich, Secretary Treasurer of the Canadian Labour Congress, and Nurjihan Mawani of the Public Service Commission of Canada as keynote speakers. Workshops included Women at Work: The Glass Ceiling Revisited; Promoting Diverse Workplaces; Employment Issues Facing Aboriginal Peoples; Political Belief Discrimination -a hot topic in Atlantic Canada! Age Discrimination; Drug and Alcohol Testing; Employee Benefits for Same Sex Partners; and Accommodating Persons with Disabilities, and the Cost (or benefits) of Accommodation.

The conference theme was most timely, as employment complaints continue to represent the largest percent of our caseload, although media criticisms of human rights commissions sometimes focus on the more unusual cases.

Next year, we shall host the CASHRA Conference at the Hotel Fort Garry, from May 25 - 28, 2003. Mark your calendars! The title is "Meeting at the Forks" and the conference will focus primarily on human rights issues facing Aboriginal people, whether on or off reserves, in provincial, territorial, federal, self-government and international contexts. This topic is particularly appropriate in light of the recently proposed amendments to the Indian Act. You are all invited to participate in this important meeting.

Commissioner Profile

Yvonne Peters Strives for Economic and Social Justice

Yvonne Peters recalls a childhood incident, which can only be described as a sign of things to come.

She was one of two blind children who attended a regular kindergarten. One day during a snack break, the other blind child fell off a folding

chair. The teacher immediately declared that from that time on, blind students could not sit on folding chairs.

"I remember feeling

confused by this as I was not the one who had fallen off the chair," recalls Yvonne. "I also remember that I strongly advised my teacher that I had no intention of giving up folding chairs."

And so began the social activism of Yvonne Peters.

In her early twenties she became a human rights advocate, particularly in the areas of women's rights and the rights of disabled people. She considered pursuing a career as a family counsellor. While completing her degree in Social Work however, Yvonne was introduced to the concept of social justice. She took a couple of classes from Professor Graham Riches.

"These classes made me realize that true social work must also include striving for a society that promotes social and economic equality."

At this point Yvonne abandoned her plans to become a counsellor and looked for opportunities in the field of human rights. She began her career in 1980 at the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission. After five years she decided to return to school.



Armed with a law degree, Yvonne embarked on new opportunities to promote human rights. Since 1993 she has operated as a sole practitioner in Winnipeg offering her clients a unique blend of legal advice and social policy development. Her clients range from community groups, human rights organizations, the corporate sector and governments.

Yvonne was appointed to the Manitoba Human Rights Board of Commissioners in 2000.

HERSCH ZENTNER, the recipient of the 2001 Manitoba Human Rights Commitment Award, has died at the age of 64.

Mr. Zentner was a gifted teacher who designed a Holocaust Awareness program. He travelled throughout the province presenting this program to students in Junior and Senior High Schools. It was his mission to influence students to become pro-active and to fight racism. Mr. Zentner died on June 11, 2002.

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"Some of these issues would be less pressing if the federal government changed The Marriage Act to allow same-sex couples to marry," Ms Baldwin said. "However, our provincial government could both amend property legislation and create a scheme of civil union that would permit common-law couples, both same-sex and opposite sex, immediately to enjoy similar property rights to married couples."

The Charter Compliance Bill proposes a number of other changes, including the amendment of conflict of interest provisions in various statutes so that they apply to same-sex common-law partners.

The Commission is also pleased that the Government recognizes the Human Rights Code and process as the appropriate vehicle generally for addressing discrimination issues.

British Columbia Disbands Human Rights Commission

The British Columbia Government has introduced legislation that will close the province's Human Rights Commission, leaving a tribunal to deal with complaints. It was one of the last acts of the government before the legislature adjourned for the summer.

The draft legislation won't be debated until the fall.

The day before the government made this announcement, Janet Baldwin, the President of the Canadian Association of Statutory Human Rights Agencies (CASHRA) and Chairperson of the Manitoba Human Rights Commission, wrote a letter to B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell. The letter, written on behalf of CASHRA members, expressed concern that any new legislation be consistent with established international standards.

"In particular, we would expect any changes to preserve the principles of independence and impartiality," she wrote.

According to B.C. Attorney General Geoff Plant, the changes are "a work in progress." He has encouraged people to make their comments known over the summer. He admitted, however, that the intent of the government is "to eliminate the Commission and put a Tribunal in the driver's seat."

The proposed changes also have concerned Shelagh Day, the senior editor at the Canadian Human Rights Reporter. In an interview with the Globe and Mail she explained that there is more to commissions than investigating complaints.

"A commission also has an educating role," she said. "It acts as an advocate against discrimination that can affect people in their ability to get a job, to get a place to live, and the way they lead their lives."

Day recalled that in 1983, the B.C. Social Credit Government eliminated the Commission. The NDP Government later restored it. "Almost 20 years later, it seems like we are repeating history," said Day, noting that every other Canadian province has a commission.