

My Trans Awakening—at Age 66

I came out after a lifetime in the closet. Now, I've found a community of people just like me in Calgary's Rainbow Elders.

BY ABBY TICKELL PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALLISON SETO

I was 10 years old the first time I came out as transgender. It was 1964, and I told my parents that I was a girl. They didn't know how to react. Back then, the concept of "transgender" wasn't mainstream, and transsexuality—as it was known then—was considered a perversion and a sexual deviation. My father's reaction was to continue shaming me for who I was: a gentle child who cried easily. So I never brought it up with them again. I learned how to walk like a boy, talk like a boy, even think like a boy. I wasn't very good at it when I was younger, but I got better as the years went by.

In my early 20s, I moved from Vancouver to Calgary, where I worked in IT. I met my first wife in 1977, and we eventually had three sons together. We got divorced when they were still kids, so I was a single parent for many years before meeting my second wife. After my sons and my stepdaughter moved out, my wife and I drifted from small town to small town in southern Alberta. By 2017, I had retired, and the two of us had ended up in Strathmore, a community 40 minutes east of Calgary.

All those years, I never dared look up the word "transgender" online. I was afraid that someone would find it in my search history and that I'd be outed. I never believed it would be possible to come out. But as life went on and I could start to see the end of the road, I wondered whether I could actually be the person I truly am. I imagined myself on my deathbed, still in the closet, thinking I'd never lived. That was heartbreaking.

In the spring of 2021, I was lonely and depressed. My world revolved around my wife: she'd been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis shortly after we got married, and I'd been focused on helping her regain her health. I was happy to support her; it gave me purpose and served as a welcome distraction. I spent my days playing guitar alone in my basement—quietly, so that no one could hear me. I lived every bit like a man: I had a beard and short-cropped hair, and I was into weightlifting. I was so deep in the closet

that I'd never worn makeup or even tried on women's clothing in private. Then, one day, I typed "transgender" into Facebook's search bar. I was shocked to find that there were so many Facebook groups for trans people online; some had over 100,000 members. People talked about going on hormone replacement therapy, or HRT; getting gender-affirming surgery; and coming out to their families. I was blown away. I had no idea these things were possible.

As soon as I found out that so many trans people were out of the closet, I realized I couldn't stay in there anymore. At the age of 66, I came out to my wife. We'd been married for about 18 years, and she had no idea that I was trans—that's how well I'd hidden it. The news was the start of a slow-motion divorce. But for me, telling her the truth lifted a weight off my shoulders. It took tremendous energy to spend my whole life acting. The day I came out to her, it was like the sun shone for the first time.

Four days later, I posted in one of the trans Facebook groups that I'd joined. I wrote about how happy I was to be out and put up a photo of myself. The post got over 500 likes. Suddenly, trans people from across the world were telling me about their own coming-out experiences. It meant a lot to know that so many people were happy for me.

A few months later, I came out to my sons and my stepdaughter. They didn't see it coming, but they were very supportive. My grandkids, in particular, have been great. They used to call me "Grandpa," and one day I said to them, "I'd like you to call me Grandy now." Just like that, they switched over without missing a beat. By then, my wife had also accepted that she couldn't change my transness, and she decided to help me move forward. She gave me advice on painting my nails, adopting a skincare routine and styling my clothes. I appreciated her help.

I started seeing a therapist, who told me about Skipping Stone, a non-profit organization based in Calgary that supports trans people across Alberta and organizes Zoom peer-support groups. I joined one for transfeminine people over the age of 50. Those first meetings were a shock, because I'd never met a trans person before. There was so much to process. Most of the members had been out for years, and they had all the answers to my questions. We talked about how to access hormone-replacement therapy, how to do

your hair and makeup, and how to present yourself in a feminine way. Suddenly, I had trans friends.

Within about six months of my coming out, my wife and I finalized our divorce. We sold our house in Strathmore and moved into separate apartments in Calgary. After we split, I felt much more free to express my gender identity. I'd put on a blouse, a skirt, jewellery and makeup, and I'd dance around the living room in a way I'd never moved before—like a girl. It filled me with joy. I also changed my name and the gender marker on my ID and met as many people as I could through Stepping Stone.

In September of 2022, I attended a picnic with the Zoom group. We met in the parking lot, all of us dressed up for a day at the park. There were a few people standing near us who weren't part of our group. The funny thing was, none of them paid much attention to us. At that moment, we were just like everyone else. That was a powerful lesson—it inspired us to get together more often, and I realized we could be exactly who we were in public, and we probably wouldn't get stares or nasty comments. We started going out for lunch, chatting about our transitions and our lives. We could be ourselves with each other.

A friend had mentioned Rainbow Elders Calgary, a volunteer-run organization that supports local LGBTQ+ seniors. I started following the group on social media, and eventually, one of their upcoming events caught my eye: another picnic in the park. It was a spectacular spring day, and the park was full of families enjoying the sun. I spotted a Pride flag in the air and found my way to a small group of seniors. We started chatting right away. Some people tossed a baseball around, while others played ring toss. I loved the whole idea that we were here, queer and not going away. Queer people, especially trans people of my generation, have done a lot of hiding in our lives. It was nice to find a group that was out and about in the community.

Since the picnic, my involvement with Rainbow Elders has become a focus of my life. The group is amazingly inclusive. There are lesbians, gay men, trans people—pretty much the whole rainbow. Rainbow Elders marches in LGBTQ+ protests and advocates for queer seniors in care homes by putting together seminars for staff and residents. It

also organizes monthly social events with activities like swimming and dancing and holds meetings where we take turns sharing our stories. I love the opportunity to speak with people my age who have similar experiences.

Recently, I led a bird-watching event at the Inglewood Bird Sanctuary in the heart of the city. I invited a friend of mine who brought a few other younger trans men with him, plus a group of Rainbow Elders. It was a cold and blustery day, but we saw some great birds and shared good conversation. Halfway through the event, one of the young men told me that he hadn't left his apartment much, and he was thrilled to be outside, getting sunshine and fresh air. He said it meant a lot to be talking to real people, rather than texting or speaking on Zoom. Afterwards, we went for brunch at a coffee shop. The friend I'd invited later told me that the sandwich he ate there was the first decent meal he'd had in a long time. It was just a bird-watching event, but it helped people in ways I didn't expect.

After coming out, you begin to change in quite a big way. Everything can shift: who your friends are, who you can partner with, how society sees you. Many Rainbow Elders came out later in life too, and they understand what it's like to have played the role of another gender for decades, and the difficulty of trying to shake that. In our generation, there are so many people who have gone through trauma, especially at the hands of our postwar parents and a bigoted society. Each Rainbow Elder has their own story, but we all share a similar vulnerability.

One of the group's goals is to support queer youth in the city. So we often visit LGBTQ+ organizations in local schools and colleges to talk to—and more importantly, to listen to—the folks there. I recently met with a LGBTQ+ student group at Mount Royal University. It was beautiful to see so many young people out and proud. Our stories as seniors are radically different from what youth are going through now. We talk to young people about losing many queer and trans people of older generations to the AIDS epidemic. And they teach us about different gender paradigms, like the term "non-binary," which wasn't a common label in my generation. Kids are coming out sooner—in elementary school, high school, university. A lot of them have supportive parents, which

was just about unheard-of for my generation. But in some ways, it's also harder for young people to come out. When I came out at 66, I was financially independent with kids and grandkids. Many young people don't have those financial and social supports. In Alberta, trans youth are also grappling with planned provincial policy changes that would limit their access to gender-affirming health care and mandate parental consent if students want to change their name or pronouns at school. I see queer and trans kids as trailblazers, and I'm glad that we as Rainbow Elders are working to support them, listen to their concerns and advocate against the government's anti-trans policies.

I've now been out for three years, and at this point, my transition is largely complete. I'm profoundly happier than I was before I came out. I used to be a quiet person who rarely smiled and barely had friends. Now, I wake up every day looking forward to what's ahead. I've become a social butterfly: I want to go and find people every day, and I'm always looking for the next Rainbow Elders event to attend. I'm finally the person I always was.

—As told to Tobin Ng



