



Hislop, George (1927-2005)

by Linda Rapp

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An early leader of the Canadian gay rights movement, George Hislop was an indefatigable fighter for equality. He was respected and beloved as the "mayor" of gay Toronto.

George Hislop, born in suburban Toronto on June 3, 1927, recognized his sexual orientation early and was able to celebrate it. "He grew up in a family environment where he was treated like the person he was. His sexuality was never an issue," recalled his longtime friend Peter Bochove.

Hislop graduated from the University of Toronto with a degree in speech and drama in 1949. He then did some work as an actor before undertaking various business ventures and embarking on a career as an activist.

The Canadian Criminal Code was revised to decriminalize consensual same-sex sexual activity in 1969, and the following year Hislop founded the Community Homophile Association of Toronto (CHAT), one of the first gay rights organizations in the country.

Led by Hislop, CHAT staged the first gay rights demonstration in Canada in 1971. Standing in the rain, dedicated members of the gay community gathered on the steps of the Ontario House of Commons, where leaders gave speeches advocating equal rights.

The same year Hislop led a campaign against the entrapment of gay men in the lavatory of the Parkside Tavern by Toronto police. As a result of his efforts the police discontinued their operation at the bar.

Hislop ran for the Toronto city council in 1980, becoming the first openly gay candidate in the city's history. The Toronto police department led an active campaign against Hislop and the incumbent mayor, John Sewell, who had a favorable record on glbtq rights issues, both of whom were defeated in the election.

The following year the Toronto police conducted a series of raids on bathhouses, arresting almost 300 men. Hislop himself faced a charge of keeping a common bawdy house because he was a part owner of one of the baths, but he was not convicted.

Hislop arranged for legal representation for men swept up in the raids. As a member of the Right to Privacy Committee he led rallies protesting the harassment by the police. The public came to view the police tactics and the rhetoric of politicians who supported them as an embarrassment, and the raids eventually ceased.

Continuing his fight against discrimination, Hislop ran in the Ontario provincial election of 1981. As an independent candidate he stood no chance of winning, but he availed himself of the opportunity to bring glbtq rights concerns to the fore.

The bathhouse issue resurfaced in 1988, when Bochove discovered that the city of Toronto was refusing to

renew their leases. He sued and called Hislop--described by the judge in his opinion as "a habitué of gay bathhouses for the past four and a half decades"--as an expert witness.

"His very expert testimony won us the case," stated Bochove. "There's no doubt in my mind. When George sat down to talk, people would listen."

Hislop's life partner of twenty-eight years, Ronald Shearer, died during heart surgery in 1986. Hislop applied for survivor benefits under the Canada Pension Plan (CPP), but his claim was denied in court. Unwilling to accept unequal treatment, he continued working for legal change to have the rights of gay and lesbian couples recognized.

The CPP finally began granting pensions to surviving members of same-sex couples in 2000, but only if the partner had died on or after January 1, 1998. Hislop initiated a class-action lawsuit on the ground that this policy denied him the equal treatment guaranteed by Canada's Charter of Rights. Four other representative plaintiffs from different parts of Canada joined him.

Hislop and his fellow plaintiffs prevailed in their suit and also in the Court of Appeal, where Justices Louise Charron, Kathryn Feldman, and Susan Lang stated in their decision that "the partners of same-sex survivors contributed to the CPP, yet their surviving partners were denied access to the federal pension program, a program that is . . . a fundamental pillar of Canada's retirement income system."

The government of Canada appealed the decision, and the case will be heard in the Supreme Court in 2006.

Nevertheless, Hislop received his first benefit check in August 2005. He welcomed the court's decision, noting that it was particularly empowering to people who may have hesitated to seek benefits for fear of homophobic reaction. "There were some people reluctant to come forward because if they lived in a small community it meant in many ways coming out of the closet, but now more and more feel free to come forward and make their claim," he stated.

For himself, he was "thinking of taking a little holiday, perhaps a short cruise in the winter into warmer weather." Sadly, it did not happen. Hislop died of cancer on October 8, 2005, less than three months after Canada became the fourth country to recognize same-sex marriages.

Hundreds of friends and family members gathered at Woody's Bar in Toronto for "Hislop's last party" to honor his legacy and contributions to the rights and culture of glbtq Canadians. These included leading the campaign to make discrimination based on sexual orientation illegal under the Ontario Human Rights Code, serving as a member of the Board of Directors of the AIDS Committee of Toronto and of the city's Committee of Adjustments, working as the longtime President of the Hassle Free Clinic, and celebrating and being celebrated by Toronto's glbtq community as Grand Marshall of the 2004 Pride Parade. He also won the International Lesbian and Gay Law Association's Karl Ulrichs Award, which honored him for his lifetime of achievement in advancing glbtq rights.

Among those attending the memorial were Toronto Mayor David Miller, Ontario Chief Justice Roy McMurtry, Canadian Defense Minister Bill Graham, and other political leaders. Health Minister George Smitherman, who had been the first openly gay member of a provincial parliament, acknowledged his debt to Hislop, saying, "The most enduring legacy of the work of George Hislop . . . is that the path he paved for me as a gay man made my life in politics so easy. For a little kid from Etobicoke he was . . . a beacon of freedom."

Toronto Councillor Kyle Rae praised Hislop for his early and persistent commitment to fighting for glbtq rights and his impact on the community. "He was out from the beginning. He had the ability and the courage to do that, and now all of us here today can do the same thing," he declared.

Gail Meredith, a representative plaintiff in the CPP case, neatly summarized Hislop's contributions to his

country and the glbtq community: "George was one of the most dedicated people I have ever met. He truly made Canada a better place for everyone by showing us that we must never stop asserting our right for equality."

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