



Wilson, Douglas (1950-1992)

by Fiji Robinson

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Douglas Wilson.
Photograph courtesy Fiji Robinson.

Doug Wilson is best remembered as the human rights activist who filed a 1975 complaint of discrimination in employment based on sexual orientation against the University of Saskatchewan. It marked one of the first times that discrimination against gay men and lesbians was challenged in the legal system in Canada.

He is also remembered as the life partner of American-Canadian writer/performer Peter McGehee. Together, they were a tour de force that married activism with art and entertainment. They collaborated on McGehee's fiction and the songs for his musical revues, and on Wilson's social and political activism and grassroots organizing.

Wilson was born on October 11, 1950 in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, the second oldest of four children. His formative years were heavily influenced by Saskatchewan's history of progressive government. Tommy Douglas was founder of Canada's universal health care plan, and as Premier of Saskatchewan led the province to adopt the first human rights protections in North America in 1947, one year before the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Wilson received his Bachelor of Education degree, with majors in art and history, from the University of Saskatchewan, and planned a career in teaching. He also had an interest in politics, serving as president of the student union in the College of Education and sitting on the university's student council. His early advocacy work involved initiating student evaluations of courses and faculty to help students in planning their programs. After completing his undergraduate degree, Wilson taught public school in Makwa, Saskatchewan, where he received excellent reviews.

Wilson's Case of Discrimination against the University of Saskatchewan

In the fall of 1975, Wilson entered the Educational Foundations graduate program in the University of Saskatchewan's College of Education, which allowed him to teach first-year students and supervise practice teachers.

Wilson had been out of the closet for only a few months when he started recruiting people to join a campus gay association. He placed an ad in the University of Saskatchewan's student newspaper, *The Sheaf*, using a College of Education post box for replies.

For James B. Kirkpatrick, Dean of Education, an ad associated with the College of Education that advocated homosexuality was a threat to the relationship between the College and the Saskatoon school boards. Fearing what might happen if the Saskatoon school boards found out that an openly gay man was interacting with younger teachers, Kirkpatrick banned Wilson from supervising student teachers.

Within four hours of being informed of Kirkpatrick's decision, a number of students, faculty, and staff of the university formed The Committee to Defend Doug Wilson. The committee took it upon themselves to organize against the university's decision, leaving Wilson to tell his story to the media.

In their comments on what was happening to Wilson, the committee wrote: "One insidious effect of Dean Kirkpatrick's action is that it encourages the furtiveness and shame from which homosexuals are only just beginning to free themselves. . . . The wider implications of this discriminatory act are obvious: if the leaders of our educational system are allowed to make such bigoted and arbitrary decisions unchallenged, then we deserve the narrow and oppressive school system which is the inevitable result."

The Education Students Union supported the committee by passing a resolution calling for Wilson's reinstatement, as did the University of Saskatchewan Students Union and members of the Educational Foundations department. The university administration, however, would not back down.

Wilson's case was picked up by the media, which brought him to national attention. His story landed him on the December 1975 cover of the national gay publication *The Body Politic*. Wilson provided a positive media image that countered the usual negative stereotypes of homosexuals. The case, and the publicity it received, had the effect of opening up discussion around homosexuality. It also caused other organizations to rethink and adopt non-discrimination clauses in their policies, including the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour and three constituency ridings (i.e., legislative districts) of the Saskatchewan New Democratic Party (NDP).

Wilson lodged a complaint with the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, requesting an investigation. The commission planned to determine whether Wilson had been discriminated against in employment because of his sex, in particular as a gay man, and whether that was contrary to section 3 of *The Fair Employment Practices Act*.

The University responded by applying to the Saskatchewan Court of Queen's Bench for an order to prohibit the inquiry by establishing that the word "sex" referred only to gender, and more specifically to women, and that Wilson's sexual orientation was not covered by the Act. The court ruled in favor of the university and Wilson's case could not move forward.

Realizing that he would not be able to teach openly as a gay man, Wilson dedicated his life to human rights activism.

Organizing in Saskatchewan

Frustrated and disappointed, Wilson dropped out of his studies, opting instead to spend the next two years organizing in the community. He served as the fourth president of the Gay Community Centre of Saskatoon, helped to found Metamorphosis, the prairie gay and lesbian festival, and the Saskatchewan Gay Coalition, a provincial group for gay activism.

One of the goals of the Coalition was to create a network for gay men and lesbians living in rural and small-town Saskatchewan. It considered itself a feminist organization, giving women a voice and supporting feminist issues. Its newsletter, *Gay Saskatchewan*, was read by subscribers across the country, as well as readers in the Midwest and Northeast of the U.S.

In 1978, Wilson was hired as Executive Director of the Saskatchewan Association on Human Rights, a non-governmental organization focusing on human rights issues across the province. He remained in the position for four years, working towards many of the goals identified by the Coalition, while broadening his understanding of discrimination in the Saskatchewan context.

The Quinlan Sisters

Wilson met the love of his life, Peter McGehee, while in San Francisco for the annual gay pride celebrations in 1979, the same year that the University of Saskatchewan banned discrimination based on sexual orientation. McGehee was a struggling writer and performer from Arkansas who found in Wilson the political perspective he would embrace in the songs he composed for his singing group, The Quinlan Sisters.

McGehee moved to Saskatoon to be with Wilson in 1980 and together they were the brains and the beauty behind the witty social, political, and sexual satire of the third and most successful incarnation of the Sisters, which McGehee formed in September 1981. The a cappella trio sang "like a punk barbershop quartet minus one, like the Andrew Sisters minus good taste, like the Osmonds without Mom, Dad and God." They ranted against the right and rallied for the disenfranchised. Wilson was manager and for the first six months found venues close to home for McGehee's musical revue that were open to their positive human rights message.

In 1982, Wilson began organizing tours for The Quinlan Sisters, including a first tour to the west coast. Two trips across Ontario gained them legions of fans and cult status in arts and gay circles. These early contacts created a network of support for all McGehee/Wilson ventures over the next nine years.

A tour of small-town Saskatchewan in August received sponsorship from the Saskatchewan Association on Human Rights and the Secretary of State, a federal department that promoted cultural policies and programs built on Canada's diversity. It was yet another way in which Wilson continued the dialogue around human rights throughout the province.

At the end of 1982, Wilson and The Quinlan Sisters moved to Toronto. The Sisters had gained some attention and they wanted to see how far they could take the group. Not long after the move, Wilson and McGehee were separated when McGehee was deported. He had been outed by his own musical revue: his immigration officer in Saskatoon saw The Quinlan Sisters singing on a cable television program. The immigration officer realized that McGehee was gay and that his marriage to a friend was not legitimate. McGehee moved to Rochester, New York, in late October 1983.

Despite McGehee's relocation, Wilson remained dedicated to managing The Quinlan Sisters. In the summer of 1984 he secured a Canada Council of the Arts touring grant that enabled the Sisters to tour Ontario and the prairies one last time before they disbanded.

In 1984, after moving to New York, McGehee married another Canadian woman. He applied to return to Canada but stayed in the U.S. until his papers were final.

Once back in Canada, he and his Quinlan Sister, Fiji Champagne Robinson, decided to put a new act together, The Fabulous Sirs. Due to other commitments, Wilson declined to be their manager.

Activist in Toronto

Toronto was a fertile ground for Wilson's interests. It had a large and diverse immigrant population, a strong women's movement, and a large, well-organized gay community, all of which needed advocacy work.

Wilson's first opportunity was working for the Toronto Board of Education in its Race Relations and Equity Office in 1983. The goal of the office was to provide equitable education to the city's diverse student body by attempting to deliver anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic education. Wilson produced the Board's *Focus on Equity* newsletter and coordinated its anti-apartheid conference.

Much of Wilson's organizing was done as a volunteer. In 1983, he was one of founders of *Pink Ink*, an alternative publication to the primarily gay male perspective of *The Body Politic*. *Pink Ink* was intended for

a more diverse audience as a vehicle for talking about social justice issues for all persons. But the publication encountered some funding problems and was short lived. Out of it however, grew the Rites! collective and its publication, *Rites: For Lesbian and Gay Liberation*, which continued with the same goals begun with *Pink Ink*. *Rites* continued to publish until 1993.

Living in the inner city, Wilson became an advocate for tenants' rights, volunteering from 1986 to 1988 on the board of the Federation of Toronto Tenants' Association. This led to his involvement with the Friends of Downtown, which successfully lobbied against a scheme of one-way streets that would have seriously impacted Church Street and the heart of the gay neighborhood.

During those same years, Wilson became involved internationally as National Coordinator on a part-time contract with Mission for Peace, an organization lobbying for peace in Central America. He coordinated trips for Canadian politicians, bureaucrats, and NGO staff going there to assist in a peace process. In particular, the Canadian government and Canadian grassroots organizations, such as unions, universities, churches, and other sectors, were assisting the Nicaraguan Sandinista government in the areas of literacy, health, and workers' rights. In 1987, Wilson went to Nicaragua as part of a six-person delegation looking at how Canadian government policies were affecting that country.

In 1988, the Ontario government's inaction around improved treatment for people with AIDS resulted in Wilson and others founding AIDS Action Now!, which lobbied politicians and put pressure on governments, drug companies, and other institutions. Their diligence was eventually successful in providing improved access to information, drugs, and financial aid.

That same year, believing that political action could make a difference, Wilson ran for the 1988 New Democratic Party nomination in the riding of Rosedale, home to some of the wealthiest and poorest neighborhoods in Toronto. He and his supporters worked hard to wrestle the nomination away from establishment-favorite Anton Kuerte, a well-known classical pianist. When Wilson won the nomination he became the first openly gay candidate nominated by a major political party in Canada.

During the 1988 federal election Wilson campaigned tirelessly. Mid-way through the campaign, however, he came close to dying from a hitherto undetected case of pneumocystis pneumonia and the campaign was abandoned. Wilson and McGehee were devastated to learn that they were both HIV-positive.

From that point on, Wilson dedicated more of his time lobbying and organizing for the treatment of AIDS/HIV as founding chair of the Canadian Network of Organizations of People Living with HIV/AIDS.

Wilson and McGehee

In 1977, Wilson founded Stubblejumper Press, a press dedicated to publishing works by Canadian lesbians and gay men. Through it he published his own slim volume of poems, *The Myth of the Boy* (1977). He also published Ian Young's essay *Gay Resistance: Homosexuals and the Anti-Nazi Underground* (1985), which chronicles the anti-Nazi contributions of gay men in Germany.

In 1983, Stubblejumper Press published McGehee's first novella, *Beyond Happiness: The Intimate Memoirs of Billy Lee Belle*. Wilson and McGehee then produced a one-man show based on the novella that McGehee performed across Canada, in New York City, and in San Francisco in 1983 and 1984.

Wilson's influence was also felt through the close role he played as advisor and sounding board for McGehee on his three books, *The I.Q. Zoo* (1991), *Boys Like Us* (1991), and *Sweetheart* (1992).

In mid-1991, with McGehee's health in serious decline, Wilson helped him complete the revisions to *Sweetheart*. Wilson's own health was precarious, but he was determined to look after his partner until the end. The steady flow of support team members through their home exhausted him, but Wilson was grateful

for their aid, which allowed McGehee to die at home on September 13, 1991. In 1992, Wilson traveled so he could spread McGehee's ashes in New York, San Francisco, and Saskatchewan.

Shortly after McGehee's death, Wilson found notes for the third book in McGehee's projected trilogy. Wilson became driven to write it for his lover. He retreated to the Saskatchewan Writers Colony at St. Peter's Abbey in Muenster, as McGehee had done for the earlier books. He finished *Labor of Love* two weeks before his own death on September 26, 1992.

The Canadian publisher that had contracted the book demanded changes that no one could make and finally declined to publish it. St. Martin's Press stood by their commitment, however, and published *Labor of Love* in both the U.S. and Canada.

Wilson's life was celebrated at private and community gatherings in Toronto and Saskatoon.

His legacy is recognized by the Gays and Lesbians at the University of Saskatchewan through the Doug Wilson Award. Established in March 1995, the award honors those individuals who have shown leadership and courage in advancing the rights, equality, and well-being of glbtq people at the university. The award is considered by some to be the most prestigious gay/lesbian award in Saskatchewan.

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About the Author

Fiji Robinson is Communications Coordinator for the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission. She has worked in the field of communications for some 20 years, and also researches and produces for film and television. In 1981, at the tender age of 26, an impressionable and unsuspecting Peggy Robinson survived a gin and tonic audition and went on to become Fiji Champagne Robinson in writer/performer Peter McGehee's two irreverent gay musical revues, "The Quinlan Sisters" and "The Fabulous Sirs." She is writing her memoirs of her life as a Quinlan Sister.