



Gay Alliance Towards Equality (GATE) first began in Vancouver, when Roedy Green organized like-minded Lotusland queers who wanted—and were willing to work towards—change in attitudes towards sexual minorities. As an organizing force, GATE moved parallel to the many streams of political activism that were in motion through the pivotal summer of 1969 and the gradual emergence of the importance of a public and visible “gay community.”

In the early years, a primary impetus for GATE was political lobbying to work towards fair and equitable representation in Canadian society. However, GATE also provided a safe and valuable social aspect for LGBTQ2 people taking their very first steps into the light. Not every Canadian city had a GATE office, making Edmonton’s branch and its growth even more remarkable.

Michael Roberts, a contemporary of Green, decided an Edmonton branch would be ideal, even though he had Calgary roots.¹ Michael wanted to discreetly protect his Calgary family from being affected by his gay lobbying in Edmonton. Part of GATE’s early lobbying efforts included a 1972 brief to the Alberta legislature, requesting the inclusion of sexual orientation as a protected ground in the new Individual’s Rights Protection Act.² Roberts told the legislature that in failing to provide basic human rights protections for gays and lesbians, the government was denying civil liberties to almost 82,000 Albertans.³

In November of 1970, based within a small apartment in Edmonton House, Michael established the twin hallmarks of a GATE chapter: a discreet personal ad in the Edmonton Journal and a phone line where callers could receive peer counselling. These two elements were critical in helping to provide access to information and resources, or a sympathetic ear, for scores of LGBTQ2 people, both local and those travelling to Edmonton. GATE also gave Edmonton’s growing LGBTQ2 community a centralized place and a presence outside of the two gay nightclubs established in the mid 1970s (Club 70 and Flashback).

In December 1971, to publicize GATE’s arrival, Roberts had an opinion letter published in the Edmonton Journal and another in The Gateway—the University

of Alberta’s student newspaper. In writing to the Edmonton Journal, Roberts stated, “We homosexuals have the right to be treated with the respect given to any human being and the right to full equality before the law.”⁴

Between 1971 and 1972, Roberts worked with GATE members Manus Syzonkin, a professor at the University of Alberta’s Music Department, and his lover Jack Hurt, who played piano for the Edmonton Symphony, to set up the organization’s founding constitution. GATE would be officially inaugurated on June 28, 1972.⁵ GATE was now one of Edmonton’s very first LGBTQ2 community organizations!



As Roberts realized that most of GATE’s calls were coming from the University of Alberta/Garneau area, he moved from an apartment downtown to a house located at 11012 86 Avenue in the Spring of 1973. This move would allow

¹ Early organizers included Michael Roberts, Bob Emery, Bill Booth, Tom Hutchinson, and M.A. Mumert. GATE eventually became a registered society with S. V. Landberg, Constance Beaulieu, Bob Emery, Bill Booth, and Bob Radke signing the application.

² “Homosexual Albertans Seek Rights,” Edmonton Journal, November 4, 1972, 33.

³ “Homosexual Albertans,” 33.

⁴ Michael Roberts, “Homosexuals,” Edmonton Journal, December 6, 1971, 4.

⁵ 1972 Press Release from Michael Roberts.

GATE to expand its services by creating room for a counselling team and a drop-in centre, also known as Michael's Living Room.⁶ Bill Booth, one of the earliest tenants in the GATE house, recalled the informal agreement that required all roommates to take shifts answering the phone. Every one of these phone calls was meticulously logged and notated, providing a detailed and fascinating look back at the main concerns facing prairie queers in the early 1970s.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the calls were focused on finding and connecting with other LGBTQ2 people. Club 70, which opened the same year as Michael set up the phone line, could always be recommended, as well as other 'unofficial' meeting places such as the taverns in a few of the large downtown hotels, where queers and allies discretely gathered before the bars opened or the street-level cruising that occurred all over downtown began.

The GATE house soon became a hive of activity, eventually adding an always-on coffee machine and a small and growing library of queer-themed literature. The GATE house lasted for two years when GATE moved a short distance away and rented an upstairs office next to Muriel Taylor's dance studio on 109 Street and 83 Avenue. With this move, GATE evolved from being a place where people just hung out to more of an official office. Now, suddenly, there was



money needed to pay for the rent. As a result, GATE began hosting fundraising events to support its operations and activism. A community centre was born, which would eventually become, through many different incarnations, what we know today as the Pride Centre of Edmonton.

In the fall of 1973, an attempt at developing a women's collective folded, and some of those organizers brought their energy and efforts to GATE, which now had a much wider community presence. This was a turning point where women became much more prominently involved in GATE's leadership group, often acting as its prime movers and organizers for years to come. The office's proximity to the League for Socialist Action, which was just around the corner, also provided for some intriguing opportunities to share human resources, even connecting two lesbian activists together as a new couple. By now, Roberts had been replaced as President of GATE by Bob Radke.⁷

To help raise money for their new office space, fundraisers were held at Club 70 and eventually the Roost. GATE would purchase the liquor license for the evening, allowing the private clubs to open for an extra evening in the week.

From its early focus on peer support, GATE shifted its mandate to include broader causes, such as addressing inequity in the age of consent laws, challenging immigration policy, and lobbying the provincial government to pay more attention to queer issues. GATE was often active during civic elections, canvassing candidates' opinions and attitudes on LGBTQ2 people.

In 1976, GATE moved across the river and set up shop downtown: first on 101 Street, and then at its most iconic location on 104 Street (in Phillips Lofts), just two short blocks from Flashback and The Roost. A gaybourhood was now beginning to take shape.

Throughout the 1970s and 80s, GATE continued to take on a more significant political advocacy function, with the fight for basic human rights protections continuing to play a central role. As Radke recalls, in 1979, "We tried to get the support of the Human Rights Commission to get the Government of Alberta to include sexual orientation as a prohibited ground for discrimination."⁸ Another example of GATE's advocacy involved working with similar groups across Canada when, in 1977, a CBC outlet in Halifax refused to carry a public service announcement by a LGBTQ2 organization. In defense of the public backlash, a CBC representative in Alberta stated, "It is the considered CBC view that Canadian society at the present time is not ready to condone homosexuality as socially acceptable."⁹ This led to a national protest, including pickets at CBC buildings across Canada.

GATE worked tirelessly to continually help raise visibility and awareness throughout the city, which frequently included creating posters in bars and clubs and other places around Edmonton. In addition to advertising GATE's services, flyers were created in 1978 when Anita Bryant brought her anti-gay crusade through the Prairies.¹⁰ There were also more ominous posters created, such as the ones posted on The Hill warning potential cruisers about the gay bashing that had been occurring with alarming frequency and intensity in the early 1980s.

This isn't to say that GATE was removed entirely from social events. Dances were still an essential fundraising vehicle for them, often serving as a popular alternative for those "tired of nothing but disco, disco, disco," as GATE stated in their May 1979 issue of "Communigay," a community newsletter they published on a semi-regular basis. GATE also held a weekly social night at The Roost. These Monday night events accounted for a sizeable revenue stream until they were discontinued in August of 1984.¹¹ Many people who didn't feel connected to the bar scene, or to organized religious or sporting groups, used GATE as a friendly drop-in centre, where they could gather, meet others from the community, and enjoy socializing. GATE's growing LGBTQ2 library was also a popular resource.

In 1981, after police raided the Pisces Health Spa, the GATE call logs revealed a detailed, real-time portrait of the panic some community members were experiencing as they called seeking legal advice. Many asked what was going to happen to the Pisces membership list the police had seized and inquired about what steps could be taken to help defend the men arrested in the raid. Out of an abundance of caution, the GATE executive even removed their own membership lists from their offices to reassure members their list wouldn't

6 Valerie J. Korinek, *Prairie Fairies: A History of Queer Communities and People in Western Canada, 1930-1985* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 236.

7 Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 239.

8 Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 359.

9 "Irate Gays Bitter over CBC decision," *Edmonton Journal*, February 22, 1977, 25.

10 Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 365.

11 GATE Newsletter, October 1984, 4.

be seized by police like those of the Pisces Health Spa.¹² GATE spokesperson Doug Whitfield helped launch the Privacy Defense Committee, which was tasked with raising funds to help mount a legal defense for those arrested in the spa raid and managing the ensuing public media frenzy that erupted. GATE retained the legal services of Shelley Miller and Donna Hawley, making the lawyers available for any of the men who wanted to fight the charges, several of whom did.¹³

Part of the aftermath of the Pisces raid was also the creation of more organized Pride events, starting in 1982. GATE was instrumental in those early years before passing the torch to the newly created GALA (Gay and Lesbian Awareness Committee). This fit in with GATE's shift since the late 1970s, when they prioritized the social service aspects of their work.¹⁴

The 1980s had more struggles in store, as the HIV/AIDS epidemic began to define the decade and the LGBTQ2 community. In the spring of 1983, GATE presented a public lecture and discussion on the virus. In July 1984, just two weeks after Edmonton announced its first case of AIDS, GATE began a community education and outreach program.¹⁵ In May 1985, GATE proclaimed "AIDS Awareness Month" and sponsored a series of lectures, films, and forums to better inform the public and doctors about the disease.¹⁶ The connection between GATE and the AIDS Network of Edmonton resulted in pushback from Edmonton City Council when, in 1985, the groups approached the city for funding; Councilors Wickman and Leger expressed concerns about the linkage of the AIDS Network to a gay group.¹⁷ Walter Cavalieri, being a significant participant in both GATE and the newly created AIDS Network of Edmonton, formed an important bridge between the two groups.

With the creation of GALA in the early 1980s, GATE distanced itself further from political advocacy and lobbying efforts. This was in part necessary for GATE to receive the charitable status it needed to further expand its important social service work, which included the heavily utilized phone service which had been a feature of GATE programming since its inception. The GATE phone line provided not only referrals to LGBTQ2 businesses and groups, but also much-needed peer support. Don Meen, who had a social work background, held training sessions for peer counsellors and coached volunteer hosts in order to prepare them for the kinds of calls and questions GATE commonly received.

In 1983, GATE spawned Edmonton's first LGBTQ2 youth group. Gay Youth of Edmonton was created for those aged sixteen to twenty years old and initially met biweekly.¹⁸ This first attempt was short-lived, but a new group was quickly formed in collaboration with McMan Youth Services.¹⁹ This collaboration ended abruptly in January 1985 with a change in leadership. McMan's board

stated the service shouldn't be provided and that the space was needed for other groups. GATE initiated a write-in protest against this decision while trying to secure new partnerships and locations.²⁰ They soon found a new home with the Westwood Unitarian Society, even participating in GALA '86 with a Pride variety show. Youth groups would continue to be a staple of GATE



programming, although the names would evolve from the Gay and Lesbian Youth Group (GALYG) to Pink Triangle Youth (PTY) to Youth Understanding Youth (YUY). These name changes mirrored GATE's own over the decades.

In 1988, GATE transformed into the Gay and Lesbian Community Center of Edmonton (GLCCE). This name change was reflective of GATE's longstanding struggle to include women in its programming and mandate.²¹ The dissolution of GATE and the start of a new organization was for slightly more complicated reasons, however, mostly involving a lapse in official status and an inability to provide audited financial statements for several years. GLCCE's objectives stayed similar, though, and much of GATE's programming continued uninterrupted, from the information line to peer counselling to partnerships with the AIDS Network, GALYG, and GALA.

In 2004, GLCCE became the Pride Centre of Edmonton, continuing to reflect the growing importance of greater inclusion of all members of the LGBTQ2 community. Although physical locations and even names have changed many times over the years, GATE/GLCCE/PCE have been a central resource and support in the LGBTQ2 community for nearly fifty years. They truly have been both the hub and heart of Edmonton's LGBTQ2 community.

12 "After the Raid," The Newsletter 1 no. 1, June 1981, 12.

13 "Gate Retains Legal Counsel," The Newsletter 1 no. 1, June 1981, 1.

14 Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 244.

15 Sheelagh Caygill, "AIDS Threat Defined by Health Service," *Edmonton Journal*, July 31, 1984, F14.

16 "Gay Group Urges AIDS Awareness," *Edmonton Journal*, May 8, 1985, G2.

17 Chris Zdeb Montgomery, "Gay Groups Want City to Help AIDS Agency," *Edmonton Journal*, August 20, 1985, B8.

18 "Gay Youth of Edmonton," *Fine Print*, May 1983, 19.

19 GATE Newsletter, August 1984.

20 GATE Newsletter, February-March 1985, 3.

21 Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 235-246.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Learn more about the history of the Pride Centre of Edmonton: <https://pridecentrefedmonton.ca/about/our-history/>