

WOMONSPACE

Location 9930 Avenue 106 Street NW



www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca



Womonspace was Edmonton's longest running social, recreational, and educational society created by lesbians for lesbians in Edmonton and surrounding areas; it can arguably be called one of Edmonton's most successful and impactful LGBTQ2 organizations¹ for its contribution to building Edmonton's lesbian community over its 37-year run. Initial planning for Womonspace began in 1981 when two women, Jeanne R. and Ann E.,² who were counsellors at Gay Alliance Toward Equality (GATE),³ decided to create a safe and positive recreational space for lesbians in response to their clientele's repeated complaints that there was nothing for women to do in Edmonton⁴. With financial support and guidance from GATE, Jeanne and Ann offered the first women's dance in September 1981⁵ at Odd Fellows Hall. While organizing the first dance and conversing with other women, Jeanne and Ann realized there was both the need for a lesbian group and more than enough expertise amongst women to create and run a lesbian organization.⁶ In January 1982, Ann and Jeanne, along with Linda, Cherene, Darlene, Shirl and Candy, formed Womonspace and agreed to act as the executive until elections could be held⁷; through this process, Womonspace was born.

Womonspace grew organically in response to its board's interests, needs, talents, and membership, which was composed entirely of committed



volunteers⁸. In 1982, along with being incorporated as a non-profit society, Womonspace received its first liquor license. Offering licensed dances enabled Womonspace to become financially independent of GATE and raise funds for

1 Womonspace began in 1981 and was incorporated as a non-profit society in 1982; they held their first Womonspace dance October 23, 1982 at Hazeldean Hall and their last dance October 26, 2018 at Bellevue Hall. Other long running Edmonton LGBTQ2 organizations include The Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose (ISCWR), which began in 1977 and operates currently; and the Edmonton Pride Festival Society, which grew out of the Gay and Lesbian Awareness (GALA) recreational society in the early 1980s, was formalized in the early 1990s, and folded in 2019. For more information please see other map locations.

2 Many of Womonspace's members chose to remain anonymous for privacy and safety reasons. In the Womonspace News, many contributors used only their first names, initials, or pseudonyms when contributing their writing and when referring to other Womonspace members. Importantly, the need for anonymity and secrecy highlights the high degree of stigma, discrimination, and the repercussions lesbians faced in the 1980s and 1990s in Edmonton and throughout Canada. It was not until the Vriend v. Alberta Supreme Court decision in 1998 that sexual orientation was read into Alberta's human rights act. Before this landmark ruling, lesbians could be fired without cause, denied housing, and lose custody of their children, amongst other human rights denials, simply because they loved other women.

3 GATE, the Gay Alliance Toward Equality was established the early 1970s to fight for rights of LGBTQ2 citizens and support LGBTQ2 individuals and a burgeoning LGBTQ2 community.

4 Shane, "The Originators of Womonspace," Womonspace News, December 1982.

5 Shane, "The Originators of Womonspace."

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7 This group of women agreed to have coffee house type drop-ins, camping trips, and women-only dances, to support an Edmonton Lesbian Collective, to sponsor the 'Word Is Out' newsletter, and to establish a women's centre, called Every Woman's Place (EWP). Womonspace held meetings there for a time. This footnote cites Maureen Irwin's writing on Womonspace in Maureen Irwin's and Michael Phair's Edmonton Queer History Timeline, 1970-1991.

8 Womonspace met at and maintained an office and resource library for lesbians in the Oliver area (9926-112 St.) in the early 1980s, which was housed within another organization named Every Woman's Place. Addresses and approximate occupancy for the Womonspace offices over the years included: Every Woman's Place, 9926-112 Street NW (1982-1985); Womyn's Building, 10055 110 Street NW (1986); Women's Building, 10826 124 Street NW (1987); Women's Building, 30-9930 106 Street NW (1988-1996); and the Gay Lesbian Community Centre of Edmonton (GLCCE), 103-10612 124 Street NW (1997-2000+).

subsequent Womonspace dances⁹ and a host of recreational, social, and educational activities.¹⁰ Over the years, Womonspace offered a wide variety of activities, including pool and golf tournaments, cards and games nights, gym nights, ski trips, camping trips, self-defense classes for women, softball teams, hayrides, roller skating, film nights, and safer-sex workshops¹¹.



To inform its membership of activities and news, and potentially expand its membership, Womonspace started a monthly newsletter called Womonspace News in October 1982. Lindy Pratch, a long-time contributor and an editor of Womonspace News, recalls, "Copies were mailed to members in discreet envelopes. Additional free copies were distributed around the city in lesbian-friendly locations" (i.e., bookstores, coffee shops, the Gay and Lesbian Community Centre),¹² with additional copies left at the dances for members and guests.¹³

An inaugural issue of Womonspace News hints at the absence of recreational and social spaces for lesbians in Edmonton before the creation of the Womonspace organization. Karen writes, "Up until last year, lesbians here had

only one place to go to socialize; Flashback on Tuesday nights.¹⁴ Our purpose at Womonspace is to add to that singular outlet with a variety of other social activities just for women"¹⁵. Lindy recalls that many Edmonton clubs, including Flashback, The Roost, and Boots N' Saddles, were private member clubs. These clubs used membership policies to restrict who was coming through the doors; and at times, lesbians were restricted access over the years.^{16 17}

For a time, both The Roost and Flashback held separate "Ladies' Nights" and "Men's Nights."¹⁸ Because "Ladies' Nights" tended to fall midweek, Womonspace members approached Flashback to inquire about the possibility of holding a women's night on the weekends. They were told that a women's night would be unfair to other patrons,¹⁹ but a few months later, the bar dedicated Friday nights as "Men's Night," angering some of the Womonspace members.²⁰

Beyond such managerial decisions, club patrons were not always welcoming to lesbians; Lindy describes instances at Flashback on weekends when lesbians were called names and manhandled by straight and gay men, who did not believe they should be there.²¹ Boots N' Saddle, a private men's club, denied access to women, citing fights between lesbians and damage to property as reasons.²² Coreen Douglas and Kathy Baker from Womonspace sent an open letter to the Boots N' Saddle management suggesting if a "cruise bar" for men was desired, why not just declare it as such.^{23, 24} Lindy recalls the turmoil and challenges of negotiating Edmonton's bar scene. Womonspace offered Edmonton's lesbian community a welcome and much needed alternative; as she relates, "once a month we had our own space with Womonspace, so that was good."²⁵

Recounting the history of Womonspace, Lindy reflects, "those regular monthly dances really did feel like we were knitting together a community. Instead of a gathering of maybe five or ten women that would go to a house party, there would be a larger group of 100 or 150 women that were at a dance, so there was more of a sense of 'we're not alone,' and we can be ourselves in the space

9 Womonspace Dances took place in a variety of community leagues and halls over the years, including Odd Fellows Hall, Riverdale Hall, Hazeldean Community League, Bonnie Doon Community League, the Hellenic Hall, and Bellevue Community League. The Option Room was often the site of Womonspace pool tournaments and Womonspace's weekly women only Tuesday night pool and dancing drop-ins in the 1990s.

10 Josephine Boxwell, "Womonspace: Creating Space for Edmonton's Lesbian Community in the 1980s," Edmonton City as Museum Project, August 12, 2020, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/08/12/womonspace-creating-space-for-edmontons-lesbian-community-in-the-1980s/>.

11 Womonspace News, October 1982. Womonspace News, November 1982. Womonspace News, December 1982.

12 Womonspace News was also dropped off at gay bars every month. Darrin Hagen remembers reading Womonspace News at Flashback when he worked there; he recalls "there was always a stack of them on the deli counter and my bar" (Darrin Hagen, personal communication, April 24, 2021).

13 Lindy Pratch, "Womonspace News," Rise Up: A Digital Archive of Feminist Activism, <https://www.riseupfeministarchive.ca/publications/womonspace/>.

14 Several bars had opened for gay men and lesbians in the 1970s (i.e., Club 70, Cha Cha Palace, Flashback, and the Roost). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, some bars restricted access to lesbians at certain times citing fighting and damage to premises by lesbian patrons. This footnote cites Maureen Irwin's and Michael Phair's Edmonton Queer History Timeline, 1970-1991.

15 Karen, "Confused?," Womonspace News, December 1982.

16 Lindy Pratch, personal communication, April 17, 2021.

17 Both Boots N' Saddle and The Roost began as private men's clubs. The Roost opened access to women one year after opening to increase income and patrons, while Boots 'N Saddle opened to women as guests in 1983.

18 Darrin Hagen recalls that Ladies' and Men's Night at the Roost and Flashback were short lived experiments that evolved out of competition for customers; Darrin recalls that when one bar did one thing, the other bar responded – usually by doing the opposite. (Darrin Hagen, personal communication, April 24, 2021).

19 Womonspace News, "Flash Meets with Women," October 1983.

20 Noelle M. Lucas, "Womonspace: Building a Lesbian Community in Edmonton, Alberta, 1970-1990" (Master's Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2002), 34.

21 Lindy Pratch, personal communication, April 17, 2021.

22 "Edmonton Called Unresponsive to Lesbians," Edmonton Journal, May 25, 1983, C15.

23 This footnote cites Maureen Irwin's writing about Womonspace in Maureen Irwin's and Michael Phair's Edmonton Queer History Timeline, 1970-1991.

24 Coreen Douglas and Kathy Conrad, "Letter to the Editors: Open Letter to Boots N' Saddle," Womonspace News, July 1983.

25 See Lindy Pratch, "#Nightlife," produced by Edmonton Queer History Project, June 9, 2015, YouTube video, 8:04, https://youtu.be/3F0_rgG7jmU.

and enjoy ourselves.²⁶ Keeping in mind some of the challenges faced by lesbians in Edmonton in the 1980s,²⁷ Womonspace represented to many a safe harbour, a place to relax and be themselves, when such spaces in the public sphere were very limited.²⁸

Along with the monthly dances, the monthly edition of the Womonspace News offered Edmonton's lesbians a space to learn about current LGBTQ2 events and activities offered in the city and beyond. In the days before the Internet and social media were commonplace, Womonspace News provided members with a forum to learn with and from each other by sharing poetry, art, book reviews, thoughts on lesbian spirituality, and stories of lesbian experiences (e.g., lesbian ageing, coming out later in life, disabilities, and challenges).²⁹

Sometimes heated debates arose and were borne out within the pages of Womonspace News. When political views inevitably became part of editorials and letters to editors, upheavals resulted among members. Some highly contested hot button topics included having strippers at dances and hetero-patriarchy; violence against women concerning pornography, misogyny, and sexism; the relationship between lesbianism, feminism, women's issues, human rights issues, activism, and change;³⁰ and oppression of trans and bisexual women within lesbian and LGBTQ2 community spaces.³¹ Despite impassioned calls for solidarity amidst differences,³² some fractures occurred within the Womonspace community, and irreconcilable differences persisted. For instance, Bobby Noble, an editor of Womonspace News, left the organization, citing an inability to parse different aspects of their life, such as their identity and their activism in the world, and reconcile their lived experience with silences and secrecy expected within Womonspace.³³

Womonspace avoided politics and the visibility it brought and "adhered to the social mandate fearing that closeted members would [otherwise] turn away from the organization."³⁴ Womonspace organizer Agathe Gaulin asks, "How political could we be without jeopardizing this whole group of women who were counting on us to be their safe place?"³⁵ Safety for members meant Womonspace maintained a policy of discretion and secrecy through the years. Fears of being outed, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, could come at a high cost for many women.



At one point, Womonspace took extreme measures to protect the safety and privacy of members. The Womonspace board controversially expelled members Liz Massiah and Jackie because their political activism had caused unwanted publicity and visibility to Womonspace members and the organization.³⁶ This expulsion was because Liz and Jackie had "challenged John Crosbie, Minister of Justice, to amend the Human Rights Code to include gays and lesbians."³⁷

Liz states, "[t]he organization was very closeted," reflecting on her expulsion from the organization. "The people who initially started it did a great job and provided a safe place for women, but the overall message was 'Don't share, don't talk, don't let people know.'"³⁸ Indeed, visibility for Womonspace may have jeopardized the organization—they might have lost membership, finances, and the ability to deliver resources and offer events—³⁹but many members later questioned the necessity and prudence of Liz and Jackie's expulsion and the apolitical stance of the organization.⁴⁰ Several Womonspace members, including Liz Massiah, Maureen Irwin, and Bobby Noble, split off and joined Gay and Lesbian Awareness (GALA). Interestingly, in the 1990s, GALA had divided into two organizations, GALA Civil Rights Defense, which organized, supported, and funded the *Vriend v. Alberta* Supreme Court challenge,⁴¹ and the GALA Social Society, which later became the Edmonton Pride Festival

26 Lindy Pratch interviewed by Josphine Boxwell, "Womonspace: Creating Space for Edmonton's Lesbian Community in the 1980s," Edmonton City as Museum Project, August 12, 2020, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/08/12/womonspace-creating-space-for-edmontons-lesbian-community-in-the-1980s/>.

27 Please see interviews by Lindy Pratch, Agathe Gaulin, and Liz Massiah in "#Nightlife" and "#Community," produced by the Edmonton Queer History Project, June 9, 2015, YouTube videos, https://youtu.be/3FO_rgG7jmU.

28 For many lesbians in Edmonton, Womonspace represented what bell hooks might have called a beloved community: a site for rest, refuge, and resistance. For more information see bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) or bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).

29 Nancy Fraser (1990) might call Womonspace a "subaltern counterpublic" (p. 67), or a public that emerged in response to exclusions within the dominant public sphere. Thinking with Fraser, Womonspace News can be viewed as a "parallel discursive arena where members ...[would] invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn [would] permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 67).

30 Bobby Noble, "Editorial: If One is Cheated, We All Suffer!," Womonspace News, July 1984.

31 Please see Carol Allen referencing a Womonspace News article she wrote, called "Oppression by the Oppressed" in "#Community," produced by Edmonton Queer History Project, June 9, 2015, YouTube video, 7:41, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu0Z5e13pL8>.

32 Laura Lee, "How We Deal with Our Differences," Womonspace News, June 1984.

33 Noble, "Editorial: If One is Cheated, We All Suffer!"

34 Lucas, "Womonspace: Building a Lesbian Community in Edmonton, Alberta, 1970-1990," 113.

35 Agathe Gaulin interviewed by Josphine Boxwell, "Womonspace: Creating Space for Edmonton's Lesbian Community in the 1980s."

36 Lucas, "Womonspace: Building a Lesbian Community in Edmonton, Alberta, 1970-1990," 111.


37 Lucas, "Womonspace: Building a Lesbian Community in Edmonton, Alberta, 1970-1990," 80.

38 Liz Massiah interviewed by Josphine Boxwell, "Womonspace: Creating Space for Edmonton's Lesbian Community in the 1980s."

39 Josphine Boxwell, "Womonspace: Creating Space for Edmonton's Lesbian Community in the 1980s."

40 Lucas, "Womonspace: Building a Lesbian Community in Edmonton, Alberta, 1970-1990," 80.

41 The *Vriend v. Alberta* Supreme Court of Canada challenge was a landmark decision in 1998, which found that sexual orientation was to be read into the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, thereby making it illegal to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. This was Supreme Legislation, meaning all provinces and territories had to modify their Human Rights Acts and legislation to comply with this decision.



Society. Perhaps the division that occurred within GALA, which created separate spaces for political activism and social/recreational gatherings, highlights the challenges of many LGBTQ2 organizations, like Womonspace, that strove to develop and maintain safe spaces for its membership within the shifting and often fraught political landscape of Alberta in the 1980s and beyond.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Rise Up! A Digital Archive of Feminist Activism - Womonspace News:
<https://www.riseupfeministarchive.ca/publications/womonspace/>.

Womonspace: Creating Space for Edmonton's Lesbian Community in the 1980s, Edmonton City as Museum Project:
<https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/08/12/womonspace-creating-space-for-edmontons-lesbian-community-in-the-1980s/>.

The Alberta Women's Memory Project:
<http://awmp.athabascau.ca/digitized/womonspace/>.

The Edmonton Queer History Project YouTube Channel:
https://youtu.be/3FQ_rgG7jmU.