

Rainbow City

Stories from Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Edinburgh

Helen Clark, Special Project Manager, City of Edinburgh Museums and Galleries, tells the story of a community that called the shots, and the amazing exhibition that resulted from their vision.

In 2000 a member of the Edinburgh's gay community wandered among the People's Story Museum displays, which tell the story of the life and work of Edinburgh's people. Although the museum had made an attempt to ensure that the stories mirrored the city's own social diversity, he pointed out that the history of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities was missing. A letter to the Director led to a meeting of the museum staff, the Living Memory Association and members of the communities. Rather than a few token interviews, what the LGBT community wanted was a full-scale project to collect oral history interviews, photographs and other material that would be deposited in the museums collections and be used in a publication and an exhibition at the City Art Centre.

An initial pilot project led to the award of £100,000 of Heritage Lottery funds. The full project, named Remember When, began in August 2004. Premises were rented in the pink triangle area of the city, and Ellen Galford and Brian Thompson the project workers, and administrative assistant Anne Smith, were appointed.

A project steering group was set up that consisted of the project workers and myself for the Edinburgh City Museums and Heather Robertson for the Living Memory Association. Volunteers were trained to record oral history interviews. During the course of the project over 100 interviews were carried out and these have been fully transcribed and deposited in the People's Story oral history archive.

These interviews and the consultation advised the themes for display. An exhibition group was set up which consisted of members of museum staff along with an audio-visual consultant. The steering group identified the main themes of the exhibition as Identity, Activism, Scene, People and Culture. Collections of objects started to flow into the museum.

One of the most challenging parts of the exhibition was the 'Corridor of Fear'. This had negative newspaper headlines on the wall and voices conveying spoken insults and internal fears about 'coming out'.

This in-your-face treatment was very different to the way the communities dealt with racism in The Peoples of Edinburgh. This was a two year community-led project celebrating cultural diversity in the city, which also led in 1996 to an exhibition in the City Art Centre. Here the steering group didn't want any attention given to negative sentiments and elected to call a panel on racism 'Problems and difficulties'.

So it was very interesting when the LGBT group wanted a significant part of the exhibition space to be given to the 'corridor.' The aim was to attempt to convey an idea of what it was like to be subjected to homophobic abuse.

Having this corridor did give us a slight problem. If an unsuspecting member of the public wandered into the exhibition and had abuse thrown at them, they might be offended or upset. We put signs up in the City Art Centre lift and at both entrances to the exhibition saying that the public should be aware that there was plain language in the Rainbow City exhibition. No complaints of this feature were brought to our attention and it may have even served to bring more visitors to the exhibition.

Ideas went both ways and the museum designer suggested having a closet that could be opened to reveal historical characters. The group ran with this idea and suggested putting in the closet photos of James IV, Henry Stewart Lord Darnley, Sophia Jex-Blake, Andre Raffalovitch and John Grey. Ellen wanted to put a badge saying 'How dare you presume I am heterosexual' on James IV, but one of the conditions of reproducing a National Portrait Gallery image was that we didn't interfere with the image so we decided against it.

In other ways we facilitated their suggestions of sound points, a video, a computer displaying photos, a browsing area for people to read transcripts of the interviews, and borrowing Elton John's 1975 costume from the National Museums of Scotland. Ellen wrote all the panels, with some guidance about word length, and worked directly with our designer. The cartoonist Kate Charlesworth created a series of life size characters that were positioned around the exhibition. Photos and extracts from the transcripts can be found on the website at rememberwhen.org.uk and the book *Rainbow City, Stories from Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Edinburgh* can be purchased from The People's Story price £10.99 plus p&p. To order a copy please ring 0131 529 4057.

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'Snowflakes are one of Nature's most fragile things, but just look what they can do when they stick together'

Vista M Kelly