

Egale



Canada Human Rights Trust

by Jeffrey Luscombe

This summer marked the tenth anniversary of same-sex marriage in Ontario.

However the road to marriage equality was not an easy one; it was a long difficult struggle. And Égale Canada was on the frontline of that battle every inch of the way.

The origins of Égale Canada go back to Ottawa in 1986 with a small group of people who were determined to add sexual orientation to the Canadian Human Rights Act, and they were willing to take the fight to the courts.

Égale's vision, in their own words is, "a Canada free of homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and all other forms of discrimination so that every person can achieve their full potential, unencumbered by hatred and bias."

For the last twenty-six years Égale has intervened before Canadian courts and tribunals in twenty-four cases, including eleven before the Supreme Court of Canada. In addition to arguing for the inclusion of sexual orientation in human rights legislation and the Charter, Égale has also fought on behalf of the LGBTQ community for the recognition of spousal benefits for same-sex couples and, of course, marriage equality.

And the fight continues today.

"As important as marriage was, the job is still not finished," says Helen Kennedy executive director of Égale Canada. "A lot of work still needs to be done in Canada."

Today Égale is a leader in teen suicide prevention. "Gay rights in Canada are often measured against marriage equality," Kennedy says. "But there are other problems. LGBTQ youth are still victims of violence and homelessness. They are still killing themselves." Last year, Égale hosted the first LGBTQ Youth Suicide Prevention Summit, bringing fifty experts from around North America to Toronto and from that summit was created a guide for the development of an LGBTQ youth suicide prevention strategy.

Égale also works with school boards and provincial ministries of

education to create safer and more inclusive policies. "We do education work from elementary to post secondary," says Kennedy. "We provide youth educators with resources such as lesson plans and workshops for teacher training." As part of their continuing education program, Égale plans to bring a holocaust exhibition of Nazi persecution of gays from Washington D.C. to Canada for the first time. The exhibition will visit Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver and have lesson plans to accompany the exhibition.

In Ontario, Égale now has a pilot program in university and colleges to train deans on campuses about LGBTQ students. "Right now we have six trainers running around the province to every college and university," says Kennedy. "For example, a person who identifies as trans moves into the dorm. What should you do? People just don't know. We provide the education."

And Égale's focus reaches beyond LGBTQ youth. "We are looking at doing more work for seniors," says Kennedy. "Specifically training for caregivers, but more research about LGBTQ seniors has to be done. We want to look into issues such as isolation, abuse and overall lack of services and quality of care. Often our seniors have to return to the closet. That is unacceptable."

Égale has also been working to pass bill C-279, the federal trans rights bill that would add trans rights in Canadian anti-discrimination and hate laws under the Canadian Human Rights Act. The bill is currently stuck in the Senate. "We are still hopeful C-279 will pass when the Senate returns in fall," Kennedy says. "Once they come back we will start lobbying Senators and connecting with Canadians. One thing your readers can do is get in touch with their Senator and ask them to support the bill."

And Égale's efforts do not stop at Canada's border. Russia's anti-gay laws and the Winter Olympics in Sochi is currently a hot topic for Canadians. "We work with local NGOs in Russia," says Kennedy, "with respect to how they want the west to address these issues. We wrote to IOC and asked them to ban Russia from the summer games in 2016 along with all the other countries with similar laws. We say if you don't rescind these draconian laws you are not in any more games."

Recently, Égale trained police in Montenegro before Montenegro's very first pride parade. "And the police protected the marchers against five or six hundred anti-gay protestors," says Kennedy. "That may not have happened if we were not there to train those police officers."

But all this work costs money. Since marriage equality was won, Canadians are not giving to Égale's in numbers they once did. Égale is the advocacy organization primarily in litigation while Égale Canada Human Rights Trust (ECHRT) is Canada's only national charity promoting



Helen Kennedy,
Executive Director of Égale Canada

lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans human rights through research, education and community engagement.

"After The Court Challenges Program was cancelled it meant we could no longer pay lawyers to do the work we needed to do and our litigation was stifled," says Kennedy. "And now any work is done pro bono. This greatly limits our ability to take cases like Whatcott [the recent hate-speech Supreme Court Case] through the courts. We would love to do more, but after marriage equality, people stopped giving."

At the height of the marriage fight, Égale raised about a million dollars. But to put that into perspective, in the United States one donor gave thirteen million toward the fight to overturn DOMA.

"It's difficult to motivate people," Kennedy says. "It's really hard to get someone to part with five dollars a month to address some of these issues. Though when marriage was threatened last year, we raised five thousand dollars within fifteen minutes. But when the conversation moves to homeless LGBTQ kids or the trans community, we get nothing. A donation to Égale Canada Human Rights Trust helps us provide education, community engagement, and research to Canada's LGBT community."

Donating to a Égale Canada Human Rights Trust (egale.ca) is wonderful way to get involved with community outreach and support those in need.

Jeffrey Luscombe is a freelance writer and author of the novel *Shirts and Skins*. He is also the creator and author of The Gay Groom blog

