

The RCMP experience at the 1st World LGBTQ Conference for Criminal Justice Professionals

By Civilian Member Jean Turner, RCMP “O” Division (Ontario)

The experience for three Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) members, Cst. Brendan Harkness, CM Jean Turner and Cst. Anick Fournier, who attended the conference was life-changing.

LGBTQ criminal justice professionals from 26 countries came together in Amsterdam, Netherlands (August 3-6, 2016) for a historic learning opportunity; sharing best practices and experiences of LGBTQ criminal justice professionals, including police officers.

Canadian participation was impressive with police representing RCMP, Toronto Police, Peel Regional, Calgary Police, Ottawa Police, York Regional, Hamilton Police, Ontario Provincial Police and officers from Correctional Service of Canada as well.

To say that the people we met and the life stories that we heard will forever be a reminder of how blessed we are, is also true.

The professionals that we had the privilege of getting to know from all over the world, without a doubt, have shown us how important it is for police officers to remain vigilant, to honour their sexual identity and to be positive examples within their organizations and their communities at large, despite criticism and hate that may be cast their way.

While the perception might be that because this is 2016 there is not a problem, overwhelmingly we heard stories and met police officers who spent their careers hiding their sexuality or gender identity from their co-workers or were persecuted for being “out”, affecting their careers and personal lives in ways that although hard to fathom, are all too common, even in Canada.



We met the only “out” gay police officer from the Greek Police, Lieutenant Michael Lolis. His organization would not support his attendance at the conference and denied his request to wear his uniform on the World Police Boat during the EuroPride parade.

Despite the potential for negative repercussions for him when he arrives back home he went to Amsterdam ready to celebrate who he is, paying his own

way, relegated to watching the parade from the side-line.

RCMP’s Cst. Brendan Harkness shared his personal journey when he took to the stage in full red serge uniform and talked about his full-circle journey that started in Amsterdam as a young man trying to find his way in life, becoming a Mountie and back in Amsterdam 10 years later to participate on the World Police Boat in the parade.

Although Brendan wanted to become a police officer, as a young gay man he couldn’t imagine himself being able to be both a Mountie AND gay. It wasn’t until he went to Amsterdam 10 years ago and met three gay cops that the idea that he could indeed be both, became a possibility.

We learned that equity can be taken away just as quickly as it is gained, and that the law enforcement culture, for many, moves at a snail pace towards LGBTQ understanding, inclusion and respect.

We met Adrian Jjuuko, a Ugandan human rights lawyer and advocate. He engages police and judiciary on LGBTQ rights within a largely hostile legal environment. He co-ordinated the successful 2014 effort to challenge the *Anti-Homosexuality Act*, in Uganda’s Constitutional Court and is leading the process to challenge the Act at the East African Court of Justice.

Just one day after his formal presentation at the conference there was news that the Ugandan police had raided and arrested participants at a local pride event. Many were beaten and very seriously injured in the melee. This after the police had previously given permission for the Pride events to take place.

We were alarmed to learn that since 2011, in at least eight countries (Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Zambia, Uganda, Cameroon and Kenya) criminal justice sector officials, including police officers and prosecutors have asked or ordered medical personnel to perform forced anal examinations on persons who



“In Full Force” is the new portraits series by photography duo Hadas Itzkovitch & Anya van Lit. The series is composed of more than 40 portraits of proud LGBTQ+ uniformed police officers from 14 different countries around the globe.

The portraits were shot during the 1st World LGBTQ+ Conference for Criminal Justice Professionals in Amsterdam especially for EuroPride. Five of these portraits were published on Saturday, August 6, 2016 in the Dutch newspaper Trouw (with text by Jonathan Ploeg) including RCMP's Cst. Brendan Harkness, “V” Division.

have been accused of consensual same sex conduct, purportedly to gather “evidence” of homosexual behavior. This despite the fact that forced anal examinations have been deemed a form of torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment that is “medically worthless” by the UN Special Rapporteur.

We met several trans* police officers, whose struggle to transition within their workplace were challenging to say the least and in some cases heart-wrenching to hear. We met Julie Callahan, a District Attorney Investigator in California, U.S.A. Her experience led her to founding the Transgender Community of Police & Sheriffs (TCOPS) to help other trans* officers live their authentic self.

She started in law enforcement as a Reserve police officer volunteering her time with the Fremont Police Department (CA-USA) in 1978. While testing with that agency, Julie was “outed” during a polygraph examination for a position as a regular officer. The department asked her to resign from the Reserves and to withdraw her application as a regular police officer because she was gender questioning.

Eventually she was hired by the San Jose Police Department (CA-USA), went through the police academy and began a very successful career as a police officer in 1981.

During the time between her transition and her retirement, Julie was the subject of a number of bigoted and hateful incidents. A physical assault in the restroom by a police supervisor, thefts of personal property, homophobic and trans-phobic letters and notes, refusal of other officers to respond to Julie’s calls for backup during hostile encounters with criminals, and an attack by a co-worker after work in a parking structure are some of the incidents that Julie experienced as a transgender woman in her workplace. Julie was a successful, experienced detective before anyone knew of her gender-different feelings. After her disclosure, she was never again allowed a permanent detective position within the agency.

We learned about transgender challenges in Pakistan where men who appear dressed or ornamented like a woman in public, or “who dances or plays loud music or takes part in any public exhibition in a public street or for hire in a private house” (dressed as a woman), may be arrested without warrant and punished with imprisonment for up to two years. And that is just one ramification, because anyone getting caught will also likely be subject to severe beatings and inhumane taunting and torture while in custody, by the very police of whom should protect them.

RCMP’s Cst. Anick Fournier taped a TEDtalk at the conference teaching us about the importance of LGBTQ self-identification in the

workplace. It is important to employees to have the opportunity to identify as LGBTQ and equally important for the organization where they work to know who their employees are. With this data organizations can ensure that services and workplace policies are offered and respected for LGBTQ employees.

What’s next?

We will take back to the RCMP all of the lessons we learned, especially the many personal stories from across the globe that have inspired us. We will share our own stories too, knowing that while policies can change behaviour, true understanding comes with relating our own struggles and realizing that we all have a story to share.

In all that we have taken away from this historic conference, the biggest lesson is this.....**in this rapidly changing and shrinking world, as a collective we must create a space for everyone.**



AS A CIVILIAN MEMBER FOR THE RCMP, I
AM BLESSED TO MAKE IT MY LIFE’S WORK
TELLING THE STORY OF OUR POLICE
OFFICERS; TO HIGHLIGHT AND PROMOTE
THE AWESOME EFFORTS THAT I WITNESS ON
A DAILY BASIS FROM SO MANY
PROFESSIONAL AND DEDICATED PEOPLE.
THIS CONFERENCE HAS TAUGHT ME THAT
NO MATTER WHETHER STRAIGHT OR
LGBTQ...WE ALL HAVE A STORY TO TELL.

Jean Turner, “O” Division

The Toronto Police Service are pleased to be hosting the next World LGBTQ Conference for Criminal Justice Professionals in Toronto, Canada in 2019. Watch for more information.

We want to extend our heartfelt thanks and gratitude to the Amsterdam Police Roze in Blauw and the Dutch government for hosting such an extraordinary conference. Your leadership has inspired us to continue to move forward with the resolve to do what is right and to lead by example.

To paraphrase the Reverend Canon Mpho A Tutu (Bishop Desmond Tutu's daughter), one of the many keynote speakers at the conference...

...there will be many people who want to lock you away in a closet. Just remember, when they are trying to close that door on you, take hold and slam it so hard, with such force, that it rattles and breaks the hinges right off!

For all of the brave LGBTQ police officers and criminal justice professionals world-wide who work hard every day in the name of safety and security of your communities....we are Proud to Be Your Friend.



Civilian Member Jean Turner, "O" Division shares her experience as an LGBTQ member and highlights the great work of the RCMP during a video interview with Amsterdam Police media crew. The interview will be used as part of a documentary highlighting LGBTQ police around the world.

