

Happenings

Quirk-e: Queer Seniors Creating Community

Claire Robson and Christine Morrissey

Gays face special challenges in the health-care system. The Queer Imaging & Riting Kollektive for Elders, or Quirk-e, is a grassroots community-engaged arts program that gives older queer people a voice. Originally a partnership between an artist and the Generations Project (a program for lesbian, gay, transgendered, and bisexual [LGTB] seniors), Quirk-e is now one of four member groups of the Arts Health and Seniors Project, managed by the Vancouver Parks Board and funded by several agencies in the Vancouver area: Vancouver Coastal Health, the SMART Fund, the BC Arts Council, United Way of the Lower Mainland, Society for the Arts in Healthcare, Vancouver Foundation, Britannia Seniors' Centre, and the Generations Project itself.

The Arts Health and Seniors Project is dedicated to exploring how participation in the arts can enhance the health of seniors and to supporting the development of new knowledge and expertise in the fields of seniors' wellness, chronic disease management, and community-engaged arts. The school of nursing at the University of British Columbia is responsible for the project's research component, whose purpose is to examine the impact of art-making on the emotional, spiritual, and physical health of queer elders.

Though the research is not yet complete, anecdotal evidence collected in interviews and evaluations suggests that members of the Quirk-e collective see themselves as healthier as a result of their participation in the group, which provides them with support, community, and an opportunity to process concerns, to celebrate, and to reflect on their lives. For many, participation in the collective has helped them to achieve (or in some cases renew) a sense of themselves as writers and artists. Thus their experience with Quirk-e has had a positive impact on how they construct and perceive their identities. At the same time, the collective's community outreach has raised the visibility of older queers, not just in the community at large but also in the queer community, which tends to focus on the young and the beautiful. There is now competition for

places in the 19-member collective, which has exhibited and performed at some of Vancouver's prominent venues.

The members of Quirk-e work with lead artist Claire Robson and assistant lead artist Shelley Whitehead and with Christine Morrissey, who directs the Generations Project and serves as senior worker with the group. Robson and Whitehead design learning experiences aimed at fostering new artistic skills, partly through one-on-one feedback and support. Learning occurs in a variety of contexts, including teacher-directed instruction, whole-group discussion, small-group interaction, peer feedback sessions, and partner work. Quirk-e members meet for 2 hours each week and also participate in occasional field trips and informal gatherings. They communicate regularly through e-mail and Web-based sharing.

Despite some serious health issues, members get out to the meetings on a regular basis, and, despite the large size of the group, have mastered the basics of using digital cameras and the technicalities of archiving and accessing work in different forms. This is quite an achievement given that many members had extremely limited technological skills when Quirk-e was founded. Several did not own a camera, a few had never used e-mail, and many lacked basic computer skills. During the collective's first year, 2006–07, members took photographs and created compositions in Adobe Photoshop. They also engaged in personal writing in various genres, including poetry, full-length memoir, personal essay, play, short story, and flash fiction. The artistic outcome was a community show that combined text and image creatively. As practising artists, Robson and Whitehead set the bar high and continually challenge members to push themselves, both conceptually and in terms of craft. One member, Gina, sums up the process:

At times I felt frustrated and a little annoyed...but I do think it's much better now... I would go away and "stew on things" for a while and new ideas would spring into my head. I must say, all of this has been a very good learning exercise for me.

In November 2006 Quirk-e produced a PowerPoint Display and an anthology titled *Self-Portraits*, which were launched at an open house held at the Britannia Seniors' Centre attended by 75 members of the public. The group then produced an installation work combining digital imagery and text exploring the theme "transformations." This showed at the Roundhouse Community Centre in June 2007 as part of Honouring Our Elders Week. The installation was exhibited at the University of British Columbia and at the Vancouver Public Library's Moat Gallery. The collective has since published a second anthology, *Transformations* — with the first run of 200 copies selling out within a month.

Readings by Quirk-e members are much in demand at community events. Much of the work produced by the collective has a strong queer content, and members are proud that their work may be increasing public awareness of the concerns and experiences of older LGTBs. Of the 16 Quirk-e members who responded to the question *Did the program make you more visible as a queer?*, 14 answered in the affirmative. “The showings and readings are great for showing LGTB seniors making art in the community,” commented one member. Quirk-e has received extensive coverage in *Xtra West*, a gay newspaper with a circulation of 42,000, and Robson has received an *Xtra West* Writer of the Year Award for her groundbreaking work with the group. The experience of reading in public has instilled confidence in individual members, many of whom had never before performed or read in public. Many of the written evaluations of Quirk-e’s first year commented on the sense of community it had created:

This is the most important part of the activity for me — to meet new people and make new friends. Quirk-e has been a great success for me in this regard.

It was an awesome experience to be with senior queers making a difference, in a small way, to the community.

Connecting to other LGTB members of the community enlarged my circle of friends immensely — I’m more likely to go out to events.

It is still too early to quantify the group’s impact on individual members, so we will highlight just one story. Gina is a former high-school physics teacher who describes herself as a “left-brained, scientific” person seeking a vehicle through which to tell the story of her transsexual journey. Gina was surprised and delighted to find that the methods favoured in Quirk-e gave her quick and easy access to her stories, and she proved to be a quick study, writing several short stories (one of which has been published in the Arsenal Pulp Press collection *First Person Queer*), a play, and a full-length memoir. Her installation piece, *Transition*, begins with a photograph of herself as Murray (a man), taken on his wedding day. Slowly, in a series of images that scan from left to right, Murray morphs into Gina, a woman. The final photograph shows Gina smiling, with the tiny, blurred image of Murray still visible in the region of her heart. Here are Gina’s program notes:

The intent of Transition is to show, using two photographs taken twenty-five years apart, the transition of the artist from male to female. Transition is a process of physical and emotional changes. Showing only two photographs — before and after transition — would capture some of the phys-

ical changes of the artist but not her emotional changes over time. That required presenting the two photographs several times within the work, but modified in ways that suggest the passage of time and, with it, the gradual emergence of the artist's female gender identity that was present all her life.

Quirk-e serves as an example of what a properly funded grassroots arts program can offer. The health-care system still has much to do before it can truly embrace the needs of seniors. The needs of queer seniors are even further neglected, yet little research has been conducted into the particular issues and challenges that queer seniors face. The artistic work produced by members of Quirk-e goes far beyond art therapy, to gain a wide audience. This has broadened public perceptions of queer seniors and has contributed to the building of a more accepting and educated community, one that makes the world a safer, healthier, and more welcoming place for queer elders.

The members of Quirk-e are proud of their achievements and confident of their voices, of their identity as artists, of their ability to tell their stories and articulate both their needs and their accomplishments. On a practical level, the collective represents a community of practice founded upon creative process — a community that provides mutual support and enduring friendships.

Claire Robson, lead artist for Quirk-e, is a writer, a writing teacher, and a doctoral student at the University of British Columbia, where her research focuses on creative writing and queer seniors. Christine Morrissey is director of the Generations Project. Her experience helping to care for an aging queer, first at home, then in a nursing facility, and finally in a hospice, renewed her appreciation of the need to recognize queers as they move through various systems and institutions.