

# Thinking outside the box

## Community groups contemplate future visibility

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For Jeremy Dias, community director at Jer's Vision, the end of *Xtra* marks a turning point for queer visibility.

"The hardest part is losing the physicality of having a community newspaper on the streets," he says. "For so many LGBTQ people, being ourselves is tough. The big purple boxes represent space that we are part of the community and physically present, [that] we are not mainstream, not lost, not blended into heteronormativity. That we are here, out and proud."

Since Pink Triangle Press (PTP) announced that it would be shuttering its print division, not-for-profit organizations like Jer's Vision have had to assess how the move will affect their ability to reach Ottawa's LGBTQ communities.

"The paper is mandatory reading for staff and volunteers, allowing us to learn more about the countless efforts, lives and experiences of our community," Dias says. "[But now] the community will have to step up and look at new ways to build community space."

When PTP launched the Ottawa edition of the paper in 1993, *Xtra's* mandate offered many organizations a platform to discuss issues pertaining to LGBTQ people that were often ignored by mainstream media outlets. And at a time when the community was disproportionately affected by the HIV epidemic, the paper acted as a valuable resource for those looking for programs and services that could improve their quality of life.

"The HIV/AIDS movement started as a real grassroots social movement, an LGBTQ community response to the HIV/AIDS crisis in the '80s," says Khaled Salam, executive director of the AIDS Committee of Ottawa. "This movement had challenges gaining traction in the mainstream

**“The HIV/AIDS movement started as a real grassroots social movement.” — KHALED SALAM**

media, so queer news outlets like *Xtra* played a pivotal role in raising awareness around HIV/AIDS and related issues."

"The paper has definitely been successful as a means of outreach to the LGBTQ community," he adds.

Dias is also grateful for the role the paper played in raising awareness for his organization. "Ten



Khaled Salam, executive director of the AIDS Committee of Ottawa.

years ago, I was in high school facing extreme incidences of homophobia. When I tried to address it, I was ignored, so on the advice of a friend, I sued my school."

"No local papers would touch the story, but *Xtra* did. And as a result of the media attention, local and national papers covered the story, and pressure from the community helped me win my lawsuit. The financial settlement was used to start

strong across the country, with 15.8 million Canadians reading some form of newspaper content each week. And print remains the popular format, with six in 10 Canadians preferring to read their news in printed versus online editions.

Still, NADbank notes that online readership is gaining steadily on print, with one in three Canadians reading at least a portion of their news content online from established publications.

"We recognize that with the rise of social/digital media, it is hard for print publications to keep up with breaking news and instant reporting," Salam says. "Social and digital media has higher reader engagement, more readership feedback, better tracking and analytics and increased advertising flexibility."

"[We definitely use] social media such as Facebook, and Twitter is also used for educational outreach purposes and to promote events."

Meanwhile, PTP is restructuring its online platforms to encourage community outreach and activism in new and exciting ways.

"In making our decision to go all-digital, we were well aware that we would be losing the tangible presence of the papers and, just as important, our very visible street boxes," says Ken Popert, president and executive director of PTP.

"However, we hope to offset that loss by developing a more visible presence at community events compatible with our mission and by experimenting with other forms of street presence."

With its new social sponsorship program, PTP will use its existing digital channels to build relationships with various community members and groups interested in publicizing campaigns that are in line with the organization's overall mandate. And by providing free or subsidized native advertising to these select causes, PTP hopes to help forge partnerships between community groups and individuals, organizations and businesses that can supply resources.

"The program can be much more extensive and effective on the internet, where publishing space is abundant, delivery is easy and potential audiences are huge," Popert says. "Basically, we're freeing our advocacy of activism from the prison of print."

Still, even with the benefits of the online model, Dias can't help but see the shift as the end of an era.

"When the office first heard that the paper was shutting down, a student volunteering in the office asked if we could fundraise to save the paper. She said she would do anything to keep our stories alive. I think we all feel the same way." X