

# Arts & LIFE

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## Film director, LGBTQ activist calls for basic human rights for all

By Stacey Newman  
SPECIAL TO THE CHAMPION

Grief knows no borders. On June 12, a gunman walked into Pulse — a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida — and opened fire. Forty-nine people were killed and 53 more were injured in the largest mass shooting in U.S. history.

In the aftermath of such a heinous act, there is the fallout of ideology scattered into the atmosphere. Violence against members of the LGBTQ community is common in our world.

In Canada, we avow to be one of the safest countries in the world for members of the LGBTQ community. In Ontario, the Province is taking steps to boost gender inclusivity by changing the way it displays sex and gender information on government-issued pieces of identification, including health cards and driver's licences.

Late last month at the North American Leaders' Summit in Ottawa, Canada, Mexico and the U.S. called on all members of the international community to ensure full respect for the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and intersex persons. Canada and the U.S. have committed to increasing co-operation among their diplomatic

embassies to support the decriminalization of same-sex conduct, to work with grassroots groups and to help combat violence and discrimination that target individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity.

For Milton business owner and LGBTQ activist Michelle Emson, realizing basic human rights and freedoms for all people across the globe is the beating heart of her work. A film director and videographer by trade, Emson is a human rights activist and the director of two documentary films, which explore the daily lives of and the lack of access to basic human rights faced by members of the LGBTQ community.

Emson didn't choose to be an activist. Her advocacy was born of experience, necessity, empathy and out of a strong sense of justice. Emson had long denied herself the freedom of being who she was. Assigned male at birth, Emson identified as a female as early as she can remember.

"For 50 years I was a chameleon," she said. Emson grew up in England, attended school, worked, was married, and helped to raise her step children. As an adult, she immigrated to Canada, where she called

Halton home. Emson spent five decades of her life without any sort of vocabulary to describe her experience. This took an immense toll on her self-esteem.

She outwardly identified as a woman for the first time as an adult. Doing so wasn't easy. There were surprises — good and bad. Relationships were lost — relationships that she still grieves. While some colleagues and friends were immediately supportive and accepting, others were not. This led Emson to 'look for a cure.'

Decades of living with profound loss and denial left her with feelings of self-hatred. Emson intimately understood the isolation and the trauma caused by discrimination and denial.

In the midst of her pain, however, there was something — something she recognized and explored.

The denial of basic human rights, in particular to members of the LGBTQ community, has created a critical and desperate situation across the globe. Emson knew she wasn't alone in her pain.

Canada is a leading nation in Pride movements, celebrating diversity and gay rights. Although the nation continues to face challenges, Canadians have begun embrac-

ing LGBTQ communities and reveling with its members.

The rights and freedoms of LGBTQ community members in Canada are in stark contrast to those in other parts of the world. There are more than 75 countries that consider LGBTQ status and/or activities a crime; where simply being a member of the LGBTQ community can lead to imprisonment and in some cases death.

“For 50 years I was a chameleon.”

Michelle Emson

In these countries, people in the LGBTQ community are denied the right to exist. They are devalued, denied services, jobs and freedoms. They are met with violence and hostility, and they must live in secret. They are denied their basic human rights. One such country is Ukraine, where an Equality March in 2012 was cancelled due to threats. The

following year, Pride activists hosted their inaugural rally in Kyiv, where 100 protesters marched just 300 metres with the support of 1,500 police officers in riot gear.

Emson, a globe-trotting filmmaker, became actively involved in the KyivPride movement alongside one of its founders, Olena Semenova.

The pair set out to create a film about the movement and founded KyivprideCanada, an alliance between the Ukrainian and Canadian LGBTQ communities.

That's when Emson found herself on the frontlines of the LGBTQ movement here in the Greater Toronto Area and in Kyiv.

Her film, PRIDE of Ukraine — A Documentary of LGBT Rights, was released internationally in 2015. There was even a Milton screening of the film at the Mo-

hawk Inn, where a rainbow formed just as moviegoers exited the venue. The symbolic



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