

COVID IN THE HOUSE OF OLD



ALF'S CHAIR AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

ANDREW: There was an innocence about Alf. The way he talked about his sexual desires was sort of innocent too. I know a lot of older gay men who lived in the gay world in Toronto. They are very different from Alf. He was defined by other values that he privileged for a very long time. He was a very religious person. He was able to make peace with these two parts of who he was.

LEZLIE: And the one regret he said is that he never was brave enough to have a boyfriend. And he kept hoping even at the age of 80, but he sort of knew that wouldn't happen. He was born in England. He was an only child and was brought to Toronto and that he was a music teacher.

ANDREW: His story of coming out later in life once he had checked himself into Fudger house. He was never very jaded or cynical about coming out later in life, in fact, he really was very spirited about the story.

LEZLIE: That was the first time he felt he could be his whole self. And he just felt so liberated. He said, "As soon as I knew who I was, I was hiding." He loved going to Church Street, to the 519, and the Youth/Elders project. He said it was like starting life again.

So, to describe Alf: plaid shirts. And I love plaid shirts. So, we were teasing each other about that.

He had a hunger for world news. He read the *Toronto Star*. He loved chocolate.

ANDREW: He always struck me as someone who was kind of small. He was very polite, and he wore these like really big, charming glasses.

LEZLIE: Here I am. This Brown dyke from Trinidad and I meet this at that point 82- or 83-year-old, white gay man, and we are watching the Young and Restless together.

ANDREW: There would be some, like, 45-year-old man visiting Alf and I'm like, Who is this guy? Like how does Alf have all these friends? This like 80 something year old man, who only came out like a few years ago, have all these friends within the gay community. He had a bit of a public persona at Fudger House because he was part of the Residence Council. He was always who the media would call on if they wanted to talk to an older gay person in long-term care.

LEZLIE: This Rainbow podcast recording was happening at the library. The people at the table were just fascinated to have this older, gay man speaking about back in the day. The two occasions when Alf came, mind blowing literally for these young people.

LEZLIE: COVID was tremendous in long-term care homes. Rainbow seniors were totally forgotten. And it became a life and death situation for us. And my friend Alf, I could not find out a single thing.

ANDREW: I was looking forward to going to visit. And then COVID hit and I knew I couldn't. I asked how Alf was doing. She said that he was doing fine. But she couldn't share too many more details because I wasn't a family member.

LEZLIE: Chosen family members - we were left out. For us it was horrific to even think that was happening to rainbow seniors. This new term essential caregivers. That removed us chosen family members from any kind of interaction. We started fighting with the government to have chosen family recognized as essential care givers.

LEZLIE: So I could only imagine how lonely it must have been for Alf. Something was happening with his respiratory system. The staff were overwhelmed. If you didn't have family calling up, and if you didn't have a cell phone, that was it. So this was March, April, May. I kept trying and I knew his birthday was coming up in June. And I decided, I am going. And I went with chocolates. I rang the bell and nobody came. And I was pounding pounding on the front door. Finally a staff person. "I'm here to see Alf." And they said, "You can't." I said, "I'm a member of his chosen family. I'm leZlie Lee Kam." The second person said, "I'm going to have to get my supervisor." And when I heard then I realized it just like Alf is gone. Alf has died.

ANDREW: Someone named Marcy reached out to me. She's like, Andrew, I'm so sorry, but Alf died. I was just so upset because I really wanted to know if there was anybody with him when he died.

LEZLIE: And then Andrew got in touch with me and said, that Alf is going to be interned at the cemetery on Parliament. And I said, "No, I didn't know. Nobody told me."

ANDREW: It was just LeZlie, myself and Louise. And the pastor from really far away, Northern Ontario, I think, who knew Alf. And it was so sad to me that his funeral was so small and there was snow on the ground and it was a really miserable cold day. And it just added to this like bleak, lonely atmosphere.

LEZLIE: Nobody from the long-term care home even bothered to show up. Alf was their token Rainbow activist. Anytime it was Pride, Alf was front and center for them. Alf dies and nobody from that long-term care home took the time.