

QUEER CULTURE

Historic gay bookstore at risk of closing

On the shelves of Glad Day, you can trace city's gay and lesbian history, co-manager says

BY SARAH BOESVELD

The epitaph may soon be written on Glad Day Bookshop, North America's oldest gay and lesbian bookstore – and the only one of its kind left in Toronto.

Glad Day has suffered a big decline in the past six months and fears it will be forced to shut its 40-year-old doors by the end of summer if things don't improve.

If that happens, Toronto will lose much more than a bookshop – it will lose an “active archive” of gay heritage in the city and beyond, said co-manager Sholem Krishtalka.

“On the shelves of Glad Day we have books whereby you can essentially trace Toronto's queer history from the early days to now,” he said. It's this very important recording of queer culture.”

The store, which is also relied upon to stock queer libraries in other regions, is known as a centre for gay and lesbian rights activism and censorship battles. It became the oldest gay bookstore last March after New York City's Oscar Wilde bookstore closed its doors.

Most years around this time, Glad Day would be loading up on stock in preparation for Pride Week in June. This year, it hasn't bought much at all, and has also moved to a business plan that looks only two months ahead.

Sales have declined about 20 per cent since late last year, said co-manager Prodan Nedev.

“It's already dropped too much, that's why we're kind of sounding the alarm,” he said. “Christmas sales were very bad actually and it hasn't really recovered.”

The new struggles pretty much mirror those suffered by other independent bookshops: the loss of publications, slower foot traffic and that constant competitor: the Internet.

Major gay magazine producer Mavety Media Group stopped printing many of its gay magazines, which include Mandate, Honcho, Playguy, Torso, Inches, Black Inches



John Scythes is the owner of Glad Day Bookshop, North America's oldest gay bookstore. DELLA ROLLINS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

and Latin Inches. Popular gay magazine The Advocate moved strictly online, too. About 12 such periodicals were hot sellers at the small shop, said Mr. Krishtalka.

Young people don't visit the shop much either, especially since the gay community has decentralized and is no longer mainly on the Church-Wellesley strip, said Mr. Nedev. The Internet has a wealth of gay porn, he added.

Glad Day is the second gay and lesbian bookshop to issue an SOS in the past six months. In December, the Toronto Women's Bookstore made a desperate plea for help. It has since been purchased by one of the employees and is work-

ing to morph from a not-for-profit co-op model to a for-profit business like Glad Day.

Little Sister's, a gay and lesbian bookstore in Vancouver, has also struggled with many of the same issues, said owner Jim Deva. He mainly blames publishers for courting big-box stores with big discounts and forgetting the independent shops.

“We certainly struggle, but we're not to the point to give up,” he said. “Still, the numbers are not looking really fabulous.”

Ward 27 councillor Kyle Rae said he hadn't heard about Glad Day's situation, but says it's a familiar tune.

“There was this discussion

[about closing] eight years ago and 15 years ago” during the days of heavy gay and lesbian activism, he said. “For a number of years, people have wondered how it's been able to maintain itself on Yonge Street and on the second floor.”

The store remains in its original location, which was once smack in the middle of the gay village before the community gravitated east to Church Street. Glad Day was given first dibs on the street-level space where This Ain't The Rosedale Library was before it moved to Kensington Market, but declined, saying rent would have been too high.

While he counts Glad Days as a city “institution,” Mr. Rae said the advances made toward equality have made the place less of a go-to.

“They've got a very good collection of gay oriented literature, but I don't know who's reading any more.”

To keep the place afloat, employees have started a Facebook support group page called Save Glad Day and are trying to spread the word. They're trying to draw people in with a few high-profile events including a book signing with Canadian murder mystery author Anthony Bidulka, who writes about a gay detective in Saskatchewan.