

Reflections on Jim Deva, intellectual freedom hero

By Miriam Moses and Barbara Jo May.

When Jim Deva, co-owner of Little Sister's Bookstore, died suddenly in late September the loss was deeply mourned. Jim's passing signaled the loss of a passionate advocate for intellectual freedom not only to the LGBTQ community, but also the wide community of librarians, libraries and readers in Vancouver, in BC, and in Canada as a whole.

Jim's journey from growing up in a small Alberta farming community, to meeting his life partner while working as a fur buyer in the Hudson's Bay store in Ft. Simpson, NWT, to establishing the first LBGTQ bookshop in Vancouver, which essentially became a community centre and locus of activism for several generations, is on its own amazing. Add to this the determination, guts, and overwhelming financial commitment to challenge Canada Customs (now the Canadian Border Security Agency) harassment of Little Sister's and you understand the temptation to speak of Jim in heroic terms. Canada Customs arbitrarily stopped shipments of materials to the bookstore using unsubstantiated claims of obscenity when the same material was routinely shipped without incident to mainstream bookstores. Little Sister's court battles between 1986 and 2007 are legend and well documented, (see selected sources below), but the piece that bears repeating is that this battle was waged by a small independent bookstore, for which every new development involved enormous risks in terms of both livelihood and personal security.

Library and publishing associations have shown their support and admiration for Deva and Little Sister's epic legal battles several times. CLA awarded Little Sister's the Award for the Advancement of Intellectual Freedom in Canada in 1998. BCLA passed a number of resolutions concerning Little Sister's battle with the censorship by Canada Customs/CBSA, and wrote letters to many government ministers and other politicians expressing concern about the stopping of shipments to Little Sister's and also disappointment in the Supreme Court's overturning of the Order for Advance Costs for the bookstore to pursue their battle for freedom of expression. Earlier this year, the Association of Book Publishers of B.C. awarded Little Sister's the Gray Campbell Distinguished Service Award, which is



A Little Sister's fundraising t-shirt. Photo by Miriam Moses.

presented annually to an individual or individuals who have made a significant contribution to the book publishing industry in this province. Despite this form of acknowledgement, the library and publishing community owe a large debt of gratitude to Deva and to Little Sister's for taking on this struggle on all of our behalves.

Even at the busiest periods of their court battles, Little Sister's owners and staff generously gave their time to speak at many Freedom to Read public events organized by BCLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee, and at BCLA conferences and SLAIS UBC classes.

These are a few things we think libraries could learn from Mr. Deva's and Little Sister's courage:

- Remembering that our communities (rural, suburban or urban) are diverse and that Intellectual Freedom is more than a slogan – libraries need to ensure the widest diversity possible in their collections including materials which may make us personally uncomfortable.
- Building community is not about a perfect strategic plan or a lengthy examination of metrics; rather, it is about opening one's heart and doing what's needed for your community.
- Holding fast to your values and beliefs can be difficult, but it is also true that you may find more allies than you knew you had.

The most fundamental battles over intellectual freedom are the ones in which government abridges citizens' access to information or forms of expression. Libraries deal with intellectual freedom issues of varying degrees of complexity on a day-to-day basis, but rarely does this involve directly challenging a government agency notorious for a lack of transparency like Canada Customs. In spite of the daunting task, Jim's efforts were truly the work of someone willing to defend his beliefs. At Deva's memorial service, Rev. Gary Paterson repeated something that Deva's partner Bruce Smythe told him: "Jim often proclaimed that the poet Auden saved his life... It was books that opened up worlds for him and led to opening up a bookstore that opened up worlds for so many of us." This sentiment resonates deeply with us and we thank Jim for his tireless efforts to afford all Canadians the freedom and opportunity to seek out life-changing material of their own.

Learning more about Little Sister's court cases and the legacy of Mr. Deva

Little Sister's has a great archive of information on their website, including press releases, news stories and a transcript of the 1996 Supreme Court judgement:

<http://littlesisters.ca/blog/about/about-us/>

<http://littlesisters.ca/blog/about/supreme-court/>

The papers relating to the Little Sister's legal cases were donated to SFU's Special Collections in 2007. This collection will be invaluable to historians and other researchers documenting the significance of Deva's work.

Other resources:

- "Restricted Entry: censorship on trial" Janine Fuller and Stuart Blackley, edited by Nancy Pollak; introduction by Jane Rule. Press Gang Publishers, 2nd ed., 1996
- "Forbidden Passages: writings banned in Canada", introductions by Pat Califia and Janine Fuller. Cleis Press, 1995



(L-R) Val Patrick, Carla Graebner, Jeff Davis and Yail Waisman at an IPC and IFC sponsored Unbakesale at the 2007 BC Libraries conference with the proceeds going to Little Sister's Legal Fund. Photo by Tara Robertson.

- "Detained at Customs: Jane Rule testifies at the Little Sister's trial" Jane Rule Lazara Press, 1995 (chapbook published by Penny Goldsmith's Lazara Press, with proceeds going to Little Sister's Defence Fund)
- "Little Sister's vs. Big Brother" (Film) Cari Green and Aerlyn Weissman (director) Moving Images, 2002
- All of the above are no longer available to purchase, but available in B.C. libraries.

Some tributes to Mr. Deva and Little Sister's:

- <http://www.pressreader.com/canada/xtra-vancouver> (Special tribute to Deva in Xtra Vancouver, 9 October 2014)
- <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/jim-deva-was-a-champion-for-gay-rights-free-speech/article21072783/?page=all>
- <http://bcbookworld.com/bcbookawards/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Brian-Lams-speech-for-Little-Sisters-2014.pdf>

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