

Quirke: Feature on Dementia

Christine Waymark describes her loves in life despite failing memory

by Paula Stromberg

I'm scared despite my luck in growing older. About 25,000 new cases of dementia are diagnosed in Canada every year, according to the Alzheimers Society of Canada. Might this happen to me? I think I would want to die. - Paula Stromberg

Two years ago, Christine Waymark, a member of my queer seniors' arts and writing group, Quirke, stopped attending our weekly meetings at Britannia Community Centre after she fell ill and was diagnosed with what she describes as short-term memory loss.

Because of Christine's past generosity to me — a couple of years ago she assigned one of her company employees to provide a year of free counselling sessions to my troubled relative — I want to reciprocate. Since I've

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Although Christine Waymark is no longer well enough to attend weekly meetings of her seniors queer arts and writing group, Quirke, due to a diagnosis of short term memory loss, she was pleased to open up about her her life, loves and achievements in a series of interviews with fellow Quirke member Paula Stromberg.

Some people claim all we have in life is our memories — but Christine Waymark is clear there's a lot left as memories fade

Memories are
precious as we age
— I just don't make
new ones

supported myself my entire life as a writer, my best offering might be a written portrait of her. Thus I suggest to Christine and her family that I bring a picnic lunch and collaborate on a story about her life, loves and achievements. The family agrees and daughter-in-law Janet suggests I include “something lemony” for dessert as it is Christine’s favourite flavour.

For the lunch interview, Christine and I meet in her gleaming East Vancouver home where, for now, she lives on her own. Her younger sister, a retired nurse, may move into a suite in the house. Caregivers and her family members check every day to help her continue living on her own. “Despite my faulty memory, I have lots to live for — and yes, I love being interviewed,” says Christine as she snuggles into her favourite chair, a blue recliner in the living room.

Although not well enough to continue attending Quirke, Christine, 79-years old, talks enthusiastically about coping with health challenges and memory loss. In a far ranging discussion, she comments about her life, lists her challenges and superpowers as well as outlining her proudest accomplishments. She also



Quirke members such as (L-R) Christine Waymark, Marsha Ablowitz, Ellen Woodsworth and Cyndia Cole enjoy a moment in the sun outside the Seniors Centre at Britannia Community Centre in Vancouver.

“I am the eldest of five children.

Growing up

there wasn't much focus on me.

Then I had a husband

and four children

to care for.

I had my counselling clients,

my business, and also I had

Robin, my wife of 30 years

who developed Alzheimer's

and needed my care.

Finally I have no obligations.

It's all about me.”

Living in the immediate present is what gives me hope



Christine's family cares for her in her own home, as well as hires caregivers who come each day. Ensconced in her favourite blue recliner while visiting with her daughter-in law Janet (pictured on sofa above), Christine explained that after her diagnosis, she felt scared at first. "Now I feel gratitude, especially to my family for their care. I try to be positive and easy to care for." Robin Rennie, Christine's wife of 30 years is pictured in the framed picture on the wall at top left in this photograph.

talks about recent bombshell news. "After some falls and concussions, I was hospitalized last year for two months with severe hallucinations when my kids told me I had to move from my west side house and live closer to their east Vancouver neighbourhood.

"With my memory loss, even though they had told me about the move several times, I was still shocked. Eventually I realized the move put me five minutes away from my family if I needed care. When I lived on the west side, they had to drive one hour each way."

"It isn't helpful to think of dementia as an ending—I remind myself that dementia is a process. We are all aging, losing our memories and eventually we all will die. For me, dementia is a shift in perception."

— Christine Waymark

**Christine and her wife Robin Rennie founded their business
Dragonstone Counselling more than 30 years ago**



Christine has collected dragons all her life. “I was born in the Year of the Dragon. I love dragons because they symbolize the mysteries of life, they can fly and thus can see things from any angle. I also love their mystical, fiery nature.” In this photo she displays just a few dragons from her vast collection.

**“These days, if I think
about the future, I
promptly forget it”**



Christine loves the
LGBTQI rainbow flag
and her family
ensures her home is
festooned with Pride
rainbow pinwheels,
buttons, towels and
flags

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As I arrange egg salad sandwiches and cherry tomatoes on a tray beside her, Christine explains that she wants to be easy to care for, easy to love. “I believe that the most important thing in life is relationships — How I relate to someone.”

She says her brain, her intelligence, is one of her superpowers, despite declining memory. “For example, to accept the shock of moving, I faced the fact that my family lovingly enabled me to stay in my own home and that they would take care of me.

“I’m grateful that I keep questioning and manage to find

different understandings of a situation. So on a positive note, I realize my family wanted to take better care of me.”

She smiles. “I’d say my ability to express myself is another gift. I still have a deep understanding of what people are really trying to tell me.” Indeed Christine spent a life time of professional listening:



Christine named the counselling business Dragonstone as an amalgamation of the qualities she and her partner Robin Rennie brought to their relationship: Christine loved mystical dragons because they could fly. Robin brought earth energy and ‘groundedness’ — Robin put the stone in Dragonstone.

The firm has relocated to 4676 Main Street in Vancouver.

These days the name Dragonstone has also become high profile due to being used in the wildly popular TV series, Game of Thrones.

She trained as a child therapist, play therapist and pastoral counsellor as well as studied theology.

Born in 1940, Christine married young and had four children. She and her husband were already separated by 1980 when she met fellow counsellor **Robin Rennie** who worked for Family Services in Vancouver. Christine worked for the Pastoral Institute. They were both let go because their two agencies were not used to having out lesbian therapists.

Meeting Robin Rennie was a turning point. “After Robin announced she was falling in love with me and said I must take it seriously, we lost our jobs for being in a lesbian relationship. But as we got to know each other, we decided to establish a counselling business together. We had fun setting it up.

“When I grew up in the fifties, I had no idea lesbians existed. Eventually I learned about gay men, but never dawned on me there could be lesbians,” she smiles.

“Suddenly I faced a crossroads. Robin was clear that I had to come to terms with women-loving-women, accept

our relationship.

“One evening, I came home to find Robin at my door, bathed in golden porch light. She had an aura around her. On that porch I realized something momentous happened — I had fallen in love with her.

**In the 1980s,
Christine & Robin were let go
from their jobs
because their respective
counselling agencies were not
used to having
out lesbian therapists**

“I struggled to hear Robin — she told me I had to accept our erotic attachment or it was over between us — and also I struggled to accept what was going on in my own heart.”

Christine says the greatest act of courage in her life was saying ‘yes’ to loving Robin. “I’m proud of our long relationship, proud that once I accepted being a lesbian, we created our business, Dragonstone counselling.”

The two women lived

together 35 years until Robin was diagnosed with Alzheimers and died in 2015. “I’m glad I said yes to Robin. We had a relationship for more than three decades.”

Their legacy continues. Dragonstone has moved from Christine’s former West side home, relocated to 4676 Main Street in Vancouver and is now employee-owned. “We established Dragonstone because we could not find support for ourselves in our lesbian relationship back then. Before 1980, it wasn’t easy for women to find a place to share fears and hopes as women loving women. It took courage just to advertise a lesbian-positive counselling practise but we did it.”

She chuckles, “We soon started attracting a large lesbian and gay clientele.” During the AIDS crisis of the eighties and nineties, gay men needed somewhere safe to turn.

“I also feel good that we were inclusive of different cultures, different orientations. Dragonstone that still trains young counsellors today — training interns enables the company to help people who can’t otherwise afford therapy.”

Although she and Robin were open about their lesbian

identities, it left Christine with a major regret: “Coming out publicly in those days meant I risked having my children taken away. I’m sorry that it was hard on my children, my teenage boys. I had not discussed coming out as lesbian with them in advance. That is one of my few regrets in life.”

Despite that regret, Christine says she considers her children, her family, one of the greatest successes in her life. “I’d like to think they feel loved by me and free to be the people they were meant to be.”

As we finish the last of our egg sandwiches, I ask Christine how she defines love. “I believe we all have an

enormous capacity for love. When we honour it, we have happier lives. Love is a feeling, a physical feeling — not just words filtered through your head. Love brings tears, emotion.” As she speaks, Christine has tears running down her cheeks. I do too.

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Christine is a long time member of the Quirke seniors arts, imaging and writing group



- Row 1 (left to right):** Claire Robson (*Lead Artist*) Stephen Hardy, Christine Waymark, Paddy St.Loe, Pat Hogan, Harris Taylor.
- Row 2:** Farren Gillaspie, Bill Morrow, Greta Hurst, Marsha Ablowitz, Fatos Erguven, Maggie Shore, Janie Cawley, Chris Spencer Sandra Mudd
- Row 3:** Gayle Roberts, Kelsey Blair (*Lead Artist*), Paula Stromberg, Judy Fletcher, Chris Morrissey, Bridget Coll, Nancy Strider, Gwyneth Bowen, Val Innes, Douglas Bacon, Frank Gillespie, River Glen, Margo Dunn, Ellen Woodsworth

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“Love is an emotion that’s always in motion in your body. Of course love can be more than just sex, such as love for a friend, family member or when you cuddle an infant — it’s a feeling.”

Christine smiles as I serve the lemon curd dessert she requested. “I recall the moment I fell in love with Robin. Remembering that emotion always got me through the difficult times — going back to that golden moment under the porch light, that sense of connection with her.”

Christine goes on to explain the wisdom that comes with aging despite memory loss, such as knowing her own limitations. “If I don’t know my limitations, then I can hurt myself by expecting too much. If I accept limitations, I can adapt.

“I’m still creative. As I lose some abilities with age, it is wonderful to knit. I no longer knit from patterns.” She gestures to the brimming basket of wool skeins and knitting needles in the corner. “I knit just coloured squares. Eventually I stitch all my squares into a blanket.”

Our lunch is over. Christine wraps up on a philosophical

note. “As I age, I commit to looking on the bright side. Finding the way out of a negative situation gives me strength and hope. Without hope, my life would change for the worse. For me, hope means having faith that things can change.”

As I say goodbye and walk down the steps of her front porch, my heart is brimming. I had offered to write her story, to

offer a mirror for her life but instead Christine has been generous to me again, filling me with an unexpected sense of hope about aging, about having the courage to stay connected to life along with one’s evaporating memory. There is much to consider. As she says, “Always remember: love isn’t a memory, it’s a feeling. Love is an emotion in your body.” ◀

A legacy of generosity: Thank you Christine and Dragonstone

Quirke member Paula Stromberg produced the article and photographs in this publication to acknowledge the extraordinary generosity of Christine Waymark, founder and former owner of Dragonstone Counselling for assigning one of her company employees to provide a year of free counselling sessions to Stromberg’s troubled relative.

Christine is proud that she and her partner Robin Rennie established Dragonstone as a place that offered a sliding scale and some pro bono services to those unable to afford them.



Filmmaker and award-winning writer Paula Stromberg produces feature articles and short movie documentaries often in collaboration with human rights activists around the world.

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