



Breaking bread Tuesday in Canada Place's main hall are Shirish Chotalia (left) and Gurcharan Bhatia, members of the Canadian Human Rights Commission

Rick MacWilliam *The Journal*

Gays call for human rights protection

Commissioner backs demand for safeguards against discrimination

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They may be white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant and male — people who by birth find it easier than most to command power and respect in Canadian society.

But if they are gay they can be fired and refused jobs and housing.

Unprotected by human rights legislation, gays and lesbians in Alberta subjected to discrimination because of their sexual orientation have no legal recourse.

Members of Edmonton's gay and lesbian community sent out a sharp message on discrimination Tuesday at the annual Human Rights Day celebration.

George Davison, representing the gay and lesbian awareness group GALA, joined representatives from about two dozen rights advocacy groups who affirmed their commitment to human rights.

"We feel a particular need to affirm our right to be different," he told the group of about 75 gathered in Canada Place.

It's time for the rights of gays and lesbians, like those of other minorities, to gain the protection of the law, Davison said.

All human rights legislation, be it federal or provincial, should be rewritten to protect people from discrimination on the basis of sexual persuasion, he said.

Federal human rights commissioner Gurcharan Bhatia told the audience the Canadian Human

Rights Commission backs Davison's demands.

Human rights has come a long way since the United Nations declared Dec. 10 International Human Rights Day in 1948, he said.

However, some "dinosaur policies still exist," he said, pointing to the lack of human rights protection for gays and lesbians.

"To me it's not the single issue that's important.

"It shows the attitude and mentality perpetuating differences and inequality."

The Alberta Human Rights Commission refuses to advocate gay and lesbian rights legislation.

Commissioner Shirish Chotalia says although she personally supports adding a sexual persuasion clause to the Individual's Rights

Protection Act, not all members of the commission share her views.

The commission will not speak out on policy issues unless it has unanimous consent from its members, she said.

Chotalia said she believes the law will eventually change.

"It's just a matter of when — the trend is already there."

This year's Human Rights Award winner is Elizabeth Crump-Dumesnil, a teacher and education consultant with the Edmonton Catholic school district.

A specialist in intercultural education, Crump-Dumesnil works with students who because of socioeconomic or cultural problems are more likely to drop out of school.

She received her award Tuesday night in Calgary.