

# Activists Among Us

A shopkeeper, a teacher, a student, a unionist,  
a grandmother and a musician change their world

by Dan Rubinstein

Photos by Roth and Ramberg

**N**ovember 28, 1998, was a memorable day in Edmonton. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, visiting for the International Human Rights Conference, delivered an inspirational sermon about the “human family” at All Saints Anglican Cathedral. A few blocks away, New Democrat MP Svend Robinson, also in town for the conference, criticized Alberta for treating its homosexual citizens as subhumans. At roughly the same time Mayor Bill Smith presented Nobel Prize-nominated Chinese dissident Wei Jingsheng with a black cowboy hat, just days after then Calgary Mayor Al Duerr refused to bestow a white hat on Jingsheng because Duerr was concerned the traditional gift would become a “photo op for a political cause.”

And into this jumble arrived one more migrant from the east coast, another job seeker going down the road to Alberta.

In November 1998, when I moved to Edmonton from New Brunswick, I was a typical transient urban Canadian. I’d lived in Toronto, Halifax, Fredericton and Moncton, stocking a succession of apartments with discount Wal-Mart furnishings, driving to and from work no matter how short the commute, grabbing Big Macs and Tim Hortons coffee on the run and hitting The Gap every couple of years for a round of rushed shopping whenever my office outfits got a little too threadbare. I suspected there was a hidden cost behind the mass imports and disposable take-out containers of these chain stores, but

I didn’t have the time or desire to investigate, or even reflect.

Once in Edmonton, however, unable to land a full-time job at one of the city’s daily newspapers, I began to read between the lines of the mainstream media more carefully. And then, with no other outlets, I started writing for the alternative press.

Just after my first Canada Day in the city, I happened upon an unusual story. A young man was facing a \$50 fine for violating municipal bylaw 5590: he had interfered with a parade. Edmonton’s Old Strathcona Foundation holds an annual “Silly Summer Parade” along Whyte Avenue, and Trevor King had violated its “no political content” rule by carrying a placard that featured the familiar Nike swoosh logo and read “Slaves in Asia, sheep in Canada, just stop it.”

King, marching alongside the brigade from Earth’s General Store, was also wearing a pair of coveralls adorned with an upside-down Canadian flag and the phrase “Our home on native land.” Periodically, he’d unzip the front of his coveralls to reveal a T-shirt bearing the slogan “Corporate rule is crappy.”

“We sometimes have people coming to raise issues,” Old Strathcona Foundation president Judy Berghofer told me at the time. “We don’t need that. It’s supposed to be a fun, family event. We don’t want anything there that would upset the public.”

It was silly, really. Yet the chain reaction this story sparked changed me. I met King and his friends and, through these contacts, wrote articles

about locals tirelessly and creatively protesting against civic, provincial and international policies. I got a glimpse into their world. And although these people did not preach, I began to question how I lived my own life.

The word “activist,” especially since the 1999 anti-World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, conjures images of black-clad young radicals smashing McDonalds’ windows. But in Edmonton, despite its role as the capital of Canada’s most conservative province, the reality is that activists walk among us. Sustained by a dynamic arts scene, by a university that has not fully succumbed to the commercialization of knowledge, and by grassroots bonds between organizations, the activist community is like a bear newly freed from its hibernation den, ready to pounce on an abundance of hypocrisy and injustice.

They are shopkeepers who work part time at gold mines to subsidize their anti-consumerist stores. They are teachers by day, radio hosts by night and fiery public speakers at rallies on the weekend. They are university students who run feminist collectives—and run for mayor. They are union leaders who fled Pinochet’s dictatorship and haven’t forgotten the fight for rights in Chile as they negotiate for better workplace conditions. They are grandmothers who became politicized as young mothers and prefer lyrical protest to pinochle. They are musicians who tell labour stories through song lest we forget the struggles of those who came before.

## The staple of Earth's General Store is information.

**MICHAEL KALMANOVITCH CRIED** when he sold his first toilet dam. All it took was one customer deciding to reduce his water consumption with a \$7 investment. Today, after selling water retention dams for more than a dozen years, Kalmanovitch calculates that he helps save two Olympic-sized pools full of water every year.

Earth's General Store, a repository of eco-friendly and socially conscious products Kalmanovitch opened in 1991, is stocked like a true general store. It sells magazines and books, fair-trade coffee, toilet paper, wild-flower seeds, lawnmowers, bulk laundry and dish soap, incense, clothing, lightbulbs, toothpaste, handkerchiefs

and more. But its staple, according to Kalmanovitch, is information. Crammed with bulletin boards and pamphlets for everything from Esso boycotts to lesbian drop-in centres, the shop serves as an activist hub. Regulars trade stories with Kalmanovitch while he fills up their reusable containers with detergent; passersby leaf through the literature to learn about issues they'd never pondered.

Born in England and raised in Canada, Kalmanovitch first came to Alberta in 1973 for a summer job in Fort McMurray. He went on to study at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology and earned his journey-

man parts ticket. After bouncing between jobs and teaching an ecological lifestyles course at Edmonton's Environmental Resource Centre, the idea for the store struck him on Earth Day, 1991. "We're all consumers," says Kalmanovitch. "But many people, if given the education, will make the ecological choice. If they have that choice."

Earth's General Store has at times struggled to survive, partly because of Kalmanovitch's unusual salesmanship. If a customer wants to buy several boxes of long-life lightbulbs, for instance, Kalmanovitch will send them elsewhere for a better deal. He does open on Buy Nothing Day, but he urges customers not to buy anything. He even turned away his first potential sale on opening day.

"I guess I should buy something," an elderly woman said after browsing.

"Don't," Kalmanovitch replied. "That's not why we're here."

"I've always had this quandary," he explains. "If people buy lots, then I'm not doing my job. But if people don't buy enough, I'm finished."

With his parts-warehousing experience, Kalmanovitch has sporadically signed up for well-paid stints at the Echo Bay gold mine in Nunavut to inject money into the store. Working in such a polluting, extractive industry may seem like a contradiction—he's a vegetarian who bicycles to work year round and wears pro-gay stickers on his hardhat—but it's just one more opportunity to influence others, like the northern colleagues who trickle into the shop when in town.

Living in Edmonton, Kalmanovitch often feels surrounded by a bubble of like-minded people. It doesn't feel like a conservative place at all, he says. But bunking in a mining camp for a few weeks means you're among the unconverted every day. "You do have to challenge people," he says. "They might be shocked at first. But once you develop a rapport with somebody, it's very powerful. You move them along. How do I do it? I haven't figured that out yet. I just talk."

Michael Kalmanovitch Earth's General Store



Malcolm Azania CJSR's "The Terrordome"

**MALCOLM AZANIA JUST TALKS, TOO.** With a deep, rich voice and a rhyming, poetic vocabulary, his alter ego—Minister Faust—is familiar to Edmontonians as the host of CJSR's "The Terrordome" and "The Phantom Pyramid." The former is a spoken-word show that Azania prepackages at home; the latter is a program of what he calls "global African musics" performed live in the U of A station's basement studio. Both are unique on the city's radio landscape: both challenge the listener to challenge the system.

Born and raised in Edmonton, Azania who is named after Malcolm X, is the son of Nadene Thomas, a three-term president of the Alberta Teachers' Association. Watching *Roots* on TV at the age of six is a seminal memory in terms of his racial consciousness; the show was flawed, he says, but it made a powerful emotional

impact. More importantly, his house was always full of books, and as a kid Azania started reading about black national politics, then pan-Africanism, then socialism. In one respect, though, he's led a conservative life: he went straight to U of A after high school, then straight into a teaching degree, then straight into teaching.

In the classroom, Azania tells his students they're not studying English to get a job. "It's about making their lives better," he says. "This is direct social justice work—addressing all the things that matter, opening up kids to ideas." When students recognize their teacher's voice on the radio, or see him speaking at a peace or anti-racism rally, they see the connection between words and action.

Although he was in the middle of an 18-month leave of absence from teaching when I visited him in the

studio for an episode of "The Phantom Pyramid," Azania hasn't given up on public education. He's just taking time off to focus on his writing, including a science fiction novel, *The Coyote Kings of the Space-Age Bachelor Pad* [see our Jan/Feb 04 issue for an excerpt], scheduled for publication in May. But this province is his home—his mother's father was apparently Alberta's first beekeeper—and he wants to continue speaking his mind right here.

"Being a lefty in B.C. takes no guts," says Azania, who'll be running for the NDP in Edmonton Strathcona in the next federal election. "Ditto for Ontario. The Byfields may call this place home, but I do too." Ralph Klein's reign is not discouraging, he says—just annoying. "If you want to have a picnic and it's raining," says Azania, "you can have a picnic later."





Tess Elsworthy FUSS

**TESS ELSWORTHY WAS SITTING** on a café patio on Rice Howard Way, a cobblestone street lined with bars and restaurants, on September 11, 2001. A hoax bomb threat had just emptied Edmonton's city hall around the corner. City Councillor Robert Noce, who planned to unseat incumbent Mayor Bill Smith in the upcoming election, walked past Elsworthy and her friends. They heckled.

Noce approached the teens and they started debating. He told them growth was more important than the environment and that even though

you needed only 35 signatures and \$500 to run for mayor, you really had to amass at least \$100,000 to have any chance of winning. "It was a very impulsive act," recalls Elsworthy, who decided to enter the race that afternoon. "I'm kind of spontaneous that way."

Elsworthy had just returned home from Ecotopia, an environmental education camp for youth. She'd also been to the Summit of the Americas protests in Quebec City. Her activism evolved out of dissatisfaction with how important decisions were made

around the world, a feeling honed by watching social justice documentaries at Edmonton's annual Global Visions Film Festival. "They articulated the feelings I'd been having but couldn't express," she says.

Unaccustomed to public speaking, Elsworthy was nervous once officially written onto the 2001 municipal ballot. But speaking at crowded forums in high school gyms, she gained strength throughout the campaign, a seemingly innocent young woman who wasn't afraid to criticize multi-term Mayor Smith on stage. In her speeches, she focused on the need for better public transit, more environmental protection and Smith's refusal to declare Gay Pride Week. At one public forum, at a loss for words when it was her turn to talk, Elsworthy told the crowd she was gay. "All my friends knew already," she says. "My parents didn't."

Although Smith finally issued a Pride Week proclamation in 2003, Elsworthy remains angry about the homophobic atmosphere Smith and Ralph Klein help propagate. Both men say their opinions are personal and reflect what the majority of Albertans think, but Elsworthy says bigotry is much more than a personal choice—especially when you're an elected leader.

Now 20 years old and majoring in political science at the U of A, Elsworthy spends time organizing events for FUSS (Fucking Up Sexist Shit), a feminist group established in October 2002. She also confronted Klein at a July 2003 kiss-in to protest his position on same-sex marriages. She doubts formal politics will be in her future, but she does plan to stay in Alberta.

"Activists are few and far between," says Elsworthy. "If even one person leaves, it's noticed. Alberta really needs people standing up and pointing out what's wrong. We should show up at Medicare rallies and teacher protests, to show the rest of Canada that there are radical Albertans, that Alberta is not as homogeneous as people think."

## Alberta is not as homogeneous as people think.

**ON A LEAFY EDMONTON SIDESTREET**, a dozen workers coming off the midnight shift meet in the house that serves as the Canadian Union of Postal Workers' local headquarters. It's June 2003, and, armed with a strike mandate, CUPW is embroiled in intense negotiations over a new contract. Standing in the living room, local president Ramon Antipan answers questions about workplace injuries and dental premiums.

Upstairs in his cluttered office, Antipan explains that the union is fighting on several fronts at once. In addition to workload and wage concerns, Canada Post wants to close some "corporate" retail outlets and replace them with non-union franchise postal counters, like the ones in drug stores. Workers there will earn less than people employed directly by Canada Post, a scenario Antipan compares to liquor privatization in Alberta.

Antipan brings a broad perspective to his role as president. Born in

Temuco, Chile, to grain- and coffee-farming parents, he was studying business administration at university in Santiago when the military overthrew the government in 1973. He'd helped the students' union introduce democracy to campus by successfully fighting for more elected administrative positions, and was working to improve access to university for the children of farmers and workers. But when Pinochet's forces took over, he was expelled, then arrested.

In prison for a year and a half, Antipan was beaten and interrogated like thousands of other Chileans. After being released, he and his wife came to Canada as refugees. They arrived in Edmonton in May 1977. Despite the spring snow, it felt wonderful to walk down the street without being watched by police, he says. Antipan studied English, washed dishes and worked in construction before joining Canada Post in 1985. He became active in the union

almost immediately.

"We strive to be a strong union by being driven by the membership," he says. "We've been able to build a 'militant' union—and not in the bad sense that people use this word—because we see what's happening outside the workplace and feel we have an obligation to society. It's why unions existed in the first place."

Antipan encourages CUPW's approximately 1,800 Edmonton workers to take an interest in politics, whether by pushing the province to raise the minimum wage or invest in education, or by lobbying Ottawa to impose sanctions on a corrupt international regime. Even globalization, which seems far removed from the hazards of an overweight mail satchel, is relevant. Free-trade laws affect postal workers. Courier UPS is suing Canada Post over what it deems unfair competition.

"We want globalization from below," says Antipan. "Ordinary citizens gathering together and organizing."

Ramon Antipan CUPW Local President





## Activism is alive and well in Alberta.

**BORN IN THE SHADOW** of the world's largest lead/zinc smelter, near Trail, B.C., Louise Swift moved to Edmonton in the early sixties for a change of scenery. She found a bookkeeping job, got married and gave birth to her first daughter. "I sort of knew about pollution," says Swift, "but when Linda was born, that's when my activism was really stirred up."

Swift's downstairs neighbour was a

woman who wrote a book about abused children; her upstairs neighbour was a female potter. The anti-war and women's rights movements were surging and the three friends talked often, sometimes about the row of refineries in east Edmonton. In 1970, with nobody answering their questions about the smokestacks, they started a group called STOP (Save Tomorrow, Oppose Pollution), part of

a larger environmental network that worked with scientists and met with government. "But STOP," says Swift, "would go out and raise hell."

Angry about the marketing of laundry detergents full of phosphates, which harm water bodies when released into the ecosystem, STOP members would stuff shopping carts full of groceries at Safeway and proceed to the longest checkout line, then make a loud scene when they "discovered" they were buying a product with phosphates. They also started a postcard campaign that sent thousands of messages to provincial and federal politicians, at a time when confronting elected officials so bluntly wasn't common. Eventually, detergents were pulled off the shelf and laws were reformed.

Drinking tea at home with her daughter Lorraine, who works for international development agency Change for Children, Louise reminisces about the early days of environmental activism in Edmonton. Lorraine, who was delivering New Democrat flyers for mom as soon as she could walk, reminisces, too. "Mom came to my school and did a slide show when I was in Grade 3," she says. "Those were the days when everybody still littered. So STOP went to schools to talk about it. For me, it was horrific! It was my mom telling everybody what to do."

STOP faded as environmentalism professionalized, but Louise kept going. In 1993, as Klein's cuts began, she became a founding member of Edmonton's troupe of Raging Grannies, who dress in old-fashioned outfits and sing protest songs at rallies. "There comes a time when you can't go out and do the kind of things you've done in the past," says Louise. "But you can go out and sing. People listen to us and respect us because we're grandmothers."

"It's confounding for the media and the police," says Lorraine. "They can't lump the grannies in with the guy in the mohawk."

"But in Seattle," says Louise, "the grannies were tear-gassed too."

Louise Swift Edmonton Raging Grannies



**NEW YEAR'S EVE, 1999.** Maria Dunn stands shivering onstage at Edmonton's main millennial bash in Churchill Square. The countdown is about to begin, and Dunn is set to play one more song. Rather than rip into a rousing Celtic party tune, she starts strumming "For Peace and Plenty," a new song she's written about a century of Alberta history. And then she sings: "While those who've always been here were slowly pushed aside/ Land and rights submerged beneath an overwhelming tide/ But it's not some long-gone fairy tale, how the West was won/ Until we face the truth of it our healing can't be done."

Dunn was born in Scotland and raised in Ontario before moving to Edmonton's suburbs with her family at the age of 10. She studied psychology at U of A and worked as a research assistant after graduation. But that was just a day gig: her evenings and weekends were free for music. When she began writing her own songs, the subjects were your standard fare: broken hearts and long bus trips. But then Dunn started delving into her family history—reading letters from immigrants struggling to survive in a new land—and the 'Be good unto others' conviction instilled by her parents gelled with her songwriting skills.

"I've lived a comfortable life with all kinds of opportunities in a peaceful country," says Dunn, surrounded by guitars, accordions and recording gear in her cozy living room. "But my ancestors had to go through all this turmoil. Thinking about the way the world is, about who is poor and why they're poor... it started with a better understanding of my family history and moved into other stories about underdogs."

She performs across Canada and in Europe. Exposure from her millennium gig helped Dunn land a unique opportunity: artist in residence for the 2001 May Week Labour Arts Festival. The project allowed her to research Alberta labour history and write songs about specific episodes. She reaches for a



Maria Dunn Singer/songwriter

binder on the floor and, flipping through her notes, describes a partially finished song about 1,000 unemployed railway construction workers marching down Edmonton's Jasper Avenue protesting poor housing conditions in 1913.

"What I've found so fascinating about my exploration of Alberta history is that people have been demonstrating all along," Dunn says. "In the nineties, when all the cutbacks started and people started protesting, the government tried to tell us it was un-Albertan. But this has been going on for so long."

Dunn's current mission is to put together an album of historical labour songs—"the first 50 years." Eventually, with confrontations like 1986's Gainers meatpacking strike in mind, she wants to make a record of labour songs from the past 50 years. Neither of these albums will go gold. Like the benefits she plays about once a

month, they won't make her rich, either. But that doesn't matter to Dunn. "Sometimes," she says, "I think it'd be easier to live in a place where there were more people who think the way I do. But I'm surrounded by people who want to change things."

**MARCH 22, 2003,** was another memorable day in Edmonton. An estimated 18,000 people gathered downtown at an anti-war demonstration, one of the largest public rallies in the city. It was an international day of action against the U.S. attack on Iraq, yet events in Edmonton were virtually ignored by Canada's national media, even though it was the second biggest rally in the country and by far the largest per capita.

It takes many forms, but activism is alive and well in Alberta. 🍷

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