

STEP INTO MY PARLOUR

SHAUN PROULX TALKS TO:

Les Sheare and Robert Berry



Having a sense of humour and keeping things light goes a long way in a relationship. That much I learned after speaking recently to **Robert Berry** and **Les Sheare**.

If their names sound familiar, it's because the seventy-year-olds were one of two couples chosen last June as honoured Grand Marshals for the Toronto Pride Parade. You'll recall 'Fearless' was Pride's 2006 theme, hence the reason Sheare and Berry were chosen. The two men, you see, have been a couple now for a staggering fifty-one years, having first met back in the oh-so anti-homo days of 1956. If that's not fearless, tell me what is.



Or hugely admirable, for that matter. Isn't fifty-one years together as a gay couple, like, three lifetimes? Personally, as someone who, at 38, has had his share of relationships - major and minor - and who is currently in his longest to date, I'm fascinated. Fifty-one years of togetherness; an all-too rare model of long-term gay relationship success.

P.S: They also raised Berry's teenage niece.

What, oh what, is their secret? I recently chatted with them to find out.



Meet **Robert Berry**



and **Les Sheare**



Gentlemen: How and when did you both meet?



We met through a mutual friend in March, 1956.



Was it a gay friend?



Yes it was.



Did you both know you were gay?



Oh yes! And Les knew when he was 11.



Don't speak for me, Robert.



Did you know you were gay, Les?



Yes I knew I was.



Which of you made the first move?



I think I did. I took him back to my bachelor apartment.



How was that set up? Was it obviously more than just a friendly 'Let's have a beer'? Did you each know the other was gay?



Yes, there was definitely an attraction.



Did you become a couple right away?



A couple of what?



Yes we did.



You sound so alike.



We've been together so long



Time for a change.



Paint a picture: What was it like being a gay couple in the friggen 1950's?



It was kind of rough. We would have people give us looks and make remarks on the street, call us faggots, that sort of thing. We got refused service in a restaurant.



You know Robert, you're so persecuted. I never had any of those problems.



Yes you did. And trying to get an apartment too, at that time was very difficult.



When people were giving you looks.



Just walking down the street together.



And if people saw you constantly together they just sort of assumed.



How were your families towards each of you and with respect to your relationship?



Les's family was extremely good to me. They accepted me as an adopted son. My mother was sort of the opposite.



Robert, was your mother ever able to reconcile with the fact you're gay?



To a point, eh, Les?



To a point. But she would always be 'Why don't you get married?' I was quite happy with who I was and who I was with. She was rather on the cool side.



Did either of you ever try to be straight?



I dated a couple of girls but nothing became of it.



I don't say much, as you can see.



And we did raise my niece.



We took her away from his sister because her stepfather had molested her when she was fifteen. We took her away legally and brought her up.



We raised her very well, we're very proud of her. We sat her down and explained the situation when we took her in and she was quite okay with that. We had to monitor the boys; Les was very strict.



Yes, I didn't want anyone taking advantage of her. She was very pretty.

**'What do I like about Bob?
He's better than nothing.'**



**How does it feel when you see gay couples in today's progressive Canadian society, then?
Holding hands, kissing ...**



It feels great.



It's marvelous. Mind you, we don't do it; we're sort of old fashioned.



Has your relationship ever been open?



No. I don't see why you would have to if you love someone very much. Especially in this day and age with AIDS and everything. You have to be very careful.



That's Robert. Me, I could never get the U.S.S. Arizona with its 5,000 sailors in the driveway.



What's the biggest hurdle each of you have faced?



The biggest hurdle in the relationship: Getting used to someone else doing the housecleaning when he doesn't like the way I do it.



We disagree on several things, and we need to sit down and talk about it.



Having two males ... Males are usually more dominant than females, which makes things hard. Learn to accept the others viewpoints and ignore what you don't like!



Did either of you ever just want to throw in the towel and go back to sowing your wild oats?



Yeah, this morning. We're packing to go on holidays.



I just washed and ironed everything I thought he would like.



Thank god we're going to a nude beach. Mind you, I don't know what others will think. That two whales are landing?



Why have you stayed together all of this time?



Just pure love. I would be totally lost if something happened too him. I almost lost him a couple of years ago. He had a major heart attack and I thought I lost him.



Oh, god. Do you have to prey on all that stuff?



I would be lost.



I keep changing the locks so he can't get out.



If you love someone you don't want something to happen to them.



So my big question: What is the secret to your longevity? How did you do it?



You have to be content within yourself and know yourself and the person you're with. The field is always greener on the other side of the fence, but if you jump that fence you could land in cow shit. Love what you have. Plus I can't jump that high anymore; I'd get my ass caught in barbwire.



Just understanding each other and having that love there. It's just love. Even though you have your arguments. But it always goes back to that L-O-V-E word. I love Les very much and I would be a total gonner if something happened to him.



Hmmm ...



What advice would you give to a gay couple today wishing to stay together but experiencing their share of challenges?



Go see someone for counseling. Lay your issues out on the table. Write them down and sit and talk about them. Not argue. One at a time. And see what they are.



And don't be rash and say to hell with it. Talk things over.



If you care for someone it's worth working on. Finding out. You can't argue about stuff you've got to sit and talk about it.



Robert, what do you love about Les?



Everything. He's a cutie. He looks like a cherub.



Oh, thanks a lot. A little fat chubby person.



And he has a good sense of humour. He's the very open one; I'm the conservative one. Sometimes he embarrasses me.



Only because I enjoy seeing you go red.



What about you, Les?



What do I like about Bob? He's better than nothing.



Oh that's terrible!



He does all the cleaning and looks after me well (*Laughs.*)



I do the ironing; I launder the clothes. And *I'm* the butch one.



Robert, do you know you have the iron sitting on your polyester bathing suit?



What have you learnt about intimate relationships that we all need to know?



Go for broke. If it feels good do it.



It's not all about the sex. It's about the companionship.



Do you still have a sex life?



Not like we used to, but yes. Why not? And not with the help of pills yet, either. We're only 70, you know.



Now that you are legally married, has marriage made a difference in your relationship?



It's brought us closer together. We were so pleased to be able to do it. We were legally married on August 9th, 2003, at Metropolitan Community Church, by Reverend Brent Hawkes, with 100 people in attendance. We haven't had a honeymoon yet.



What, you didn't think the rubber sheets and the Mazola oil was a honeymoon?



An excellent place to end. Thank you, gentlemen; congratulations. And happy Valentine's Day.

Shaun Proulx: [Bio](#)