Why are Toronto’s Queer-Inclusive Shops Shutting Down?

Sex shop Come As You Are is closing its doors.

BY JEREMY WILLARD

From the outside, Come As You Are appeared like any other storefront on Queen West. But get a little closer, and the shop slowly revealed itself to passersby: vibrators sat in the front window, and lime green interior walls reflected the bright and adventurous toys sold inside. The shop was unabashedly sexy—and for years, it had been considered one of the most sex-positive and LGBTQ-friendly sex stores in the city.

But, that has come to an end. Come As You Are is now closed, reverting to an online-only store—and another one of Toronto’s queerer businesses has been forced to shut its doors.

The store gave no warning that its final day of business would be Sunday, August 28. Anyone passing by the following morning would have been surprised to see signs in the windows reading, “Goodbye Queen West.”

“We wanted to close quietly,” says Jack Lamon, one of the co-op’s worker-owners. “I guess we didn’t want to spend the last month doing a lot of emotional processing on the [sales] floor.”

Queer businesses are struggling now more than ever. This summer alone has seen the closure of the bar Zipperz—known for its drag king nights and thriving lesbian club scene—and the martini bar and restaurant Byzantium. Glad Day Bookshop, the world’s oldest surviving LGBTQ bookshop, is moving to a new location in the hope that expansion will save the struggling business.

Come As You Are opened in 1997 (at a different location). While it was located far from the Village, for all of its nearly 20 years in business, the majority of the co-op’s ever-changing cast of worker-owners have identified as transgender or gender variant.
Much like Good for Her and Ottawa’s Venus Envy, Come As You Are stood in contrast to mainstream sex shops. It wasn’t about boring novelties or skeezy jack-off booths. It was an institution devoted to education and stocking toys and books for a range of marginalized identities. It was a place where a knowledgeable salesperson could tell you the ins and outs of binders, packers, and STP (stand-to-pee) devices.

As with Glad Day and Byzantium (but not Zipperz—the gay bar was pushed aside for a condo development), and many others before them, high rent played a big role in the closure.

Come As You Are has considered going online-only before, but this year, with the store’s five-year lease coming up at the end of September and the $10,000 per month rent having taken its toll, the owners decided to finally pack it in.

“I think there’s like eight different reasons [for the closure],” Lamon says. “But the bottom line is that independent retail in Toronto is not sustainable…the rent here is just totally ridiculous.”

He adds, “I’ve been having panic attacks about this lease for the last five years, just being like, ‘yeah, we’re going to close, and we’re going to get sued, and our lives are going to go up in flames.’”

But, this isn’t the end of Come As You Are. The business’s thriving online store—which kept the physical store afloat as it struggled to pay rent for the last five years—will continue to exist for the foreseeable future. And so will the co-op, which allows workers to be part owners of the company.

“Not much is really going to change. It’s really just the store-level access,” he says. “Almost half of our customers access us online anyway. It’s going to be different for people who depend on the store on a week-to-week basis, but we do same-day delivery in Toronto. It’s not the same, but close enough.”

The shop will continue to do public outreach—in fact, not having to work a sales floor could mean more time for them to research and conduct seminars—and will continue to arrange workshops by such figures as bondage expert Midori. The only snag? Finding venues to host them.

According to Lamon, the main loss of the physical location is the one-on-one interaction in the store. “But we’re a phone call away,” he says. “We respond to Twitter enquiries at all hours. If anyone’s ever Facebook messaged us at 11:30 at night with a problem relating to their vibrator or a G-spot or a sexual situation, we’re right there.”

Lamon predicts he and the business’s only other worker-owner at present, Noah Kloeze, will eventually open another business. “I can’t see us not doing this for very long because we just love the vibe…we love the pace of it, we love the conversations,” he says. “And we really love our customers.”
But they will take this, as Lamon calls it, “bricks-and-mortar hiatus” to thoroughly consider the next step. He’s not sure they’d want to open up the same sort of store again.

“I could see us doing something small, like in the Junction and have really specialized products. Noah and Jack’s Trans Store would be awesome—breastforms and STPs all day long,” he says. “Or a hardcore BDSM shop for trans gay men—that would be so fun.”

As much as the closure of the physical location is sad, and indicative of a frightening reality for Toronto’s queer businesses (and indie businesses in general), Lamon is keeping an optimistic attitude about his future and that of the co-op. “Boxing up the basement was a little bit of a bummer, but I don’t know. I’m not sure the space here ever worked for us, really,” he says. “The last five years has been hard here, so I think this is really good.”