



9 MAY –  
11 AUGUST 2024  
Online

CURATED BY  
REA MCNAMARA

ORGANIZED BY  
THE MACKENZIE ART GALLERY

EXHIBITION DEVELOPMENT  
CAT BLUEMKE AND JONATHAN CARROLL

## WAKE WINDOWS: THE WITCHING HOUR

Educator Jerry Lee with curator Rea McNamara

Jerry Lee (they/them) is the EarlyON Child and Family Centre coordinator at The 519, a City of Toronto agency committed to the health, happiness, and full participation of the 2SLGBTQ+ communities. As a result, The 519 EarlyON is considered a supportive space for families of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and configurations. In addition to its drop-in EarlyON programming, The 519 EarlyON operates a mobile in-person program that visits other EarlyON sites in the GTA (Glitterbug Mobile Unit) and space for community-led drop-in specifically for babies (Every Baby Counts).

Below is an edited and abridged interview I conducted with Lee in August 2023, who began working with The 519 in 2005 to support its “Daddy, Papa, and Me” program. After taking on various casual staffing roles within the organization, they went full-time in 2019 as the Coordinator of The EarlyON.

**Rea McNamara (RM):** How would you describe the specific community needs of your EarlyON location?

**Jerry Lee (JL):** Especially with [our] location [in the] Church and Wellesley neighbourhood, I find so much pride and joy because ours is the only EarlyON located in a 2SLGBTQ community centre. I take so much pride in saying that two, three, or four times a day when I’m making announcements and saying hello to my EarlyON families.

It’s crucial that we explain those acronyms. We talk about those words because they give value to the participants who use the space. Also, the families that I find who don’t identify with any of those take pride and joy in knowing that they’re an ally. “Even if you don’t identify with any of the above letters, you are considered

our ally,” I would begin, and then I explain what that means.

“That means you are here to support us, and we can learn together and grow in a safe space. It doesn’t matter if someone’s male-assigned child is in a dress. It doesn’t matter if the female-assigned child is playing with trucks. We’re here to explore, play and learn together.”

**RM:** Since The 519 is a City of Toronto agency that serves the 2SLGBTQ+ communities, how has it also informed your EarlyON’s values and programming delivery?

**JL:** We are an EarlyON in the largest 2SLGBTQ+ Centre in all of Canada. The 519 has that status, and with our EarlyON being within it, there’s a lot more that goes on than other EarlyONs.

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For example, we have the Communications Department's help to promote things online, print our flyers, or create flyers for us to print.

We have our Facilities Department that helps us to make sure that our recycling, our garbage and our organic waste are going to the right places.

We have LOTS of people who can help, which then makes our job focusing on families, children, and parents so much more—I wouldn't say easier because it's never easy—but the ability to focus on that and not worry about things like having to take out the garbage at the end of the day or if flyers are designed in an accessible way.

**RM:** We've established how responsive your EarlyON is to its community and specific location. How has that informed how your site interprets The EarlyON's mandate, such as its four foundations of learning?<sup>1</sup>

**JL:** Because of the community we are in, not only have we responded to those four pillars in ways that most EarlyONs have, the way they do programming or incorporate "Seeds of Play" (an outdoor play pedagogy), but we've gone another step or two beyond that.

We consulted the community, talked to participants, and gathered feedback. In fact, we created programs for each of those pillars.

For example, for belonging, that means that we build programs that deliver services that help families feel connected and valued and, most of all, give them the courage and the opportunities to form relationships and support systems, which will allow them to have their opinions be valued and listened to.

In our EarlyON, belonging looks like our Every Baby Counts group—we're the only EarlyON with an Every Baby Counts program. This program began with two gay dads who had just adopted their second child and desperately wanted to give their new infant the same experiences and opportunities that their older child had.

This program is built so we can support community members to peer facilitate and lead this group. It gives a chance for families to be a part of something. To have something on their resume, be a part of a community, share ideas, connect with themselves, and see how they do with networking and outreach in a supported environment.

It's a safe world to explore these skills, transferable skills and build them up, especially if it's a teen parent or a parent who may have dropped out of school or is a newcomer. These are all things that we need to learn to be successful.

Let's learn it through the baby group. Let's take turns facilitating it. That's one answer to the belonging piece.

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<sup>1</sup> The Ontario Early Years Curriculum is based upon four foundations of learning: Belonging (referring to a sense of connectedness with others), Well-Being (the importance of physical and mental health), Engagement (a state of being involved and focused) and Expression (to be heard as well as to listen).

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**RM:** We've recently seen the impact within some GTA communities regarding drag queen story hour and how that parental outcry impacts how different schools now recognize Pride and, more broadly, recognize and value queer families. It must be so incredibly frustrating for you to see this happen.

**JL:** This is a teachable moment. "Frustration" is a very nice way of putting it. It's almost to the point where it angers me. We do so much to work with families and children in the first years of a child's life, to be gender-neutral and gender-affirming, to teach them how to ask for pronouns, people's pronouns, to tell them about different families, to show them that families come in all different types and configurations.

Then, [there] comes a time when they say, "Okay, well, you know, next week, we're gonna start daycare, or this September, we're going to start school."

"Okay, we're still open on Saturday, so please come visit."

And slowly, some of them see the change because of their peers at school or because of the teachers at school; these very same children now come back with gender-hurting concepts and ideas. "That is a girl's dress."; "Those are boy's toys."

Sometimes, this feels like more anger than frustration only because it feels like what we (at The 519 EarlyON) worked so hard at doing is being undone once children and families leave for day cares and schools.

However, many parents and even schools, when they find that they need that support, have reached out to either my manager, myself, or my colleagues. Just like how you found our emails to connect to us, a parent who feels that their child may be going through some exploration on their own can also reach out to us. A teacher or principal who says, "Oh, this is something that I've been working with a parent on/about. Can I get some resources from you?" They can reach out to us.

**RM:** How does the 519 EarlyON engage with early childhood education and pedagogy? I've been learning more about the concept of pedagogical documentation. And I was curious how you can achieve that in a space like this because it's drop-in. Having that more focused observation and recording is tricky because of the drop in nature. But, like, you engage with some aspect of that because you're responding with designing these age-appropriate play spaces. You're observing how you want the parents or caregiver to play with the kids. So I was just curious, like, as an EarlyON, how do you engage with that pedagogical methodology?

**JL:** The answer I have about that piece to the pedagogy is with EarlyON because it is a drop-in; we don't necessarily have documentation about specific children or the family. Not that we have to make a report card for them or anything like that. That's why we don't have to do that.

However, we end up documenting this through feedback, asking for suggestions, and doing a debrief form at the end of every shift. That way, any conversations we have with any parents, verbal, written, or otherwise, are documented and addressed.

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We develop workshops to address families' needs and trends. That's how we shape our program. It's still evidence-based, but it's more of a community way of documenting instead of just sitting with a child or a parent, writing notes, and observing.

We are doing that on a broader spectrum, looking more closely at the bigger picture and then letting families come forward and tell us what they need.

**RM:** How would you describe your site's approach to art and learning and its art learning practice?

**JL:** Our children's department at The 519 EarlyON has a lot of facilitation. So we build many relationships with artists [...], and our site's approach to arts learning and practices is more of a community-based approach.

We seek talent from the community and invite them. And then, and the facilitators work with them, or coordinators work with them, to then either facilitate: to be part of the program, or [when] we do a special workshop, or they become a special guest, or it's, it's something embedded into work that another department does.

There are many opportunities. But with our EarlyON, it's mostly about, let's see what artists are out there. Let's see which arts, culture, and people haven't had a chance to sit at the table yet.

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## ABOUT THE CURATOR

**Rea McNamara** is a writer and curator based in Tkaronto/Toronto. Her curatorial work has long been shaped by networked counterpublics' participatory cultures, particularly the collaborative processes of transformative fandom, alongside a social practice shaped by organizing community-based art initiatives. In her research, she often focuses on the emergence of otherness and hybridity within digital identity formations, informing an on/offline curatorial approach that connects and capacity-builds.

McNamara has previously held curatorial and public programming positions with the Gardiner Museum and Drake Hotel, and been awarded grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. She has curated and organized a range of exhibitions and public projects, including *dīs-ease* (Vector Festival, 2021), *Obsessive Pop Tendencies* (Pleasure Dome, 2019), *Community Arts Space* (Gardiner Museum, 2016-2019), and *Safe Space* (Scotiabank Nuit Blanche 2024). In 2011, she founded the art party series *Sheroes*, which engaged with female celebrity fandom through music, performance, installation, and internet-based art. Her work has been presented at The Art Gallery of Ontario and is in the Whitney Museum of American Art collection.

Additionally, McNamara has written about art, culture and the internet for *frieze*, *Art in America*, *The Globe and Mail*, and been commissioned to write exhibition texts for Trinity Square Video, the Remail Modern, and Daniel Faria Gallery. From 2020-2021, she was the Emily H. Tremaine Journalism Fellow for Curators with *Hyperallergic*. She also gives talks, moderates panels, and lead workshops on fandom, curatorial practice, and the labour of mothering for The Toronto Public Library, Toronto Metropolitan University, NYU Tisch School of the Arts, and more.

## ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

### *Wake Windows: The Witching Hour*

Led by a rebellious AI Chatbot, this interactive online exhibition guides viewers through interactive and time-based art by artists who are parents, caregivers, or educators who engage with public databases and “living archives.” In touching on maternal world building and our ever-evolving relationship with AI, *Wake Windows: The Witching Hour* intends to make visible the missing datasets in our collective understanding of the often invisible labour that is mothering. From animations to machinimas or virtual reality (VR) to interactive narratives, the digital exhibition traces how the artists' creative outputs have shifted since taking on this care work. Curated by Rea McNamara, participating artists and collaborators include Claudia Cornwall, Alejandra Higuera with Magnolia Higuera, Faith Holland with Ben Bogart and Hildegard Holland Watter, Wednesday Kim, Lauren Lee McCarthy, Rory Scott, Skawennati, and Rodell Warner. *Wake Windows* is part of a series of digital exhibitions created through the MacKenzie Art Gallery's Digital Exhibitions Toolkit and Art Installation Launcher (DETAIL)—a newly developed resource championing the development of art exhibitions for digital platforms.

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## ARTISTS

Claudia Cornwall  
Alejandra Higuera with Magnolia Higuera  
Faith Holland with Ben Bogart and Hildegard Holland Watter  
Wednesday Kim  
Lauren Lee McCarthy  
Rory Scott  
Skawennati  
Rodell Warner

## SPECIAL THANKS

Cat Bluemke  
Jonathan Carroll  
Iain Soder  
Claudia Cornwall  
Rodney LaTourelle and Louise Witthöft  
Geoff Yuen and Lee Froese of The Hatchery  
Crystal Mowry  
Nicolle Nugent  
Jayne Wilkinson  
Lisa Karen Cox  
Onika Powell  
Sharn Peters  
Natalie Haddad  
Rosemary Heather  
Linda Wilson  
Tony Halmos and Quincy Lou McNamara-Halmos.

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