

## Community Cornerstones

TAKE A  
WALK ON THE

# WILDSIDE

by Jeffrey Luscombe

Back in 1987 Patricia Aldridge placed an ad in the newspaper: “Take a walk on the wildside. Who’s that girl? It could be you.”

“I did it on a whim,” says Aldridge. “And the phone rang off the hook.”

Over twenty-six years later, Aldridge’s business Take a Walk on the Wildside is still committed to servicing crossdressers, transvestites and transsexuals in a safe, sympathetic and fun environment.

But it wasn’t easy back in the early days of her business when Aldridge could not get the larger newspapers in the city like *The Toronto Star* to run her ads. “They thought I was a dirty girl because I put makeup on men. And I was also a stripper,” she says with a laugh. “I started in my living-room and I learned to be an entrepreneur as I went along. I was transforming four people a day for two hours each—that’s makeup and women’s clothes. Today I have a large selection of clothes, but back then I used my own clothes, which were my old stripper outfits, so I was making everyone into a stripper!”

Take a Walk on the Wildside has been at its current location on Gerrard Street East for the past twenty years, when Aldridge bought the charming Victorian building across from Allan Gardens. A bedazzled motorcycle sits out front to welcome visitors to the shop. There is also parking in the back for men who are too shy to use the front door. Aldridge once ran a hotel in the building but said she ultimately found the hotel too much work. “Back in the early





**Patricia's store at 161 Gerrard Street East.**

days when I had the hotel there were twenty-five guys here every Saturday night," she says. "But I got older—and nothing stays the same. Today I rent out four rooms, plus I have twenty-six lockers for rent so guys can store their female clothes. A lot of married men can't take their female clothes home."

Transformations, which include the makeup and clothes, start at \$300.00 for about an hour in the chair. "I used to charge one hundred and fifty dollars for makeup and renting the clothes," Aldridge says, "but now I just charge three hundred and you get to keep everything. I have a barber chair for makeup and when I sit them up and turn them around and they see themselves for the first time looking like a woman—I don't let them see themselves before I'm finished—they can't believe it."

And men who come in for a transformation can expect to be dressed by someone who knows what they are doing. "I graduated from The Ryerson Theatre School in Technical Production," says Aldridge, "so I know how to dress people. I know how to put on a corset. I take care of the whole experience."

Aldridge says that many of her customers are heterosexual men. "They can't tell their wife, so they dress up when no

one is around. Some have told me they do it while their family is at church." And many of these men have never told anyone about their crossdressing desires to anyone before coming into Take a Walk on the Wildside. "I try to give them the understanding they need," says Aldridge. "It was strange at first, without training I was suddenly a counselor to these men."

And many of the clothes Aldridge sells are only available at Take a Walk on the Wildside and through her website. "You can't get our clothes anywhere else because I design them," she says. "I have the clothes made with my pattern. And I make everything to fit me. I'm a big girl and a lot of customers are like me. This is a high specialty boutique—but not at Yorkville prices."

And after almost twenty-seven years, Aldridge has learned to make clothes that can weather the unique circumstances of her clientele. "See this shirt," she says, "it doesn't crease. You can bunch it up and hide it in glove compartment and it won't wrinkle."

However, Take a Walk on the Wildside is not just for men who want to dress like women. "A lot of women come into the store," says Aldridge.

"Bigger women like me stop by because we have larger sizes. And just the other day a woman who had cancer came in to look at our breast forms."

Is there anyone out there that Aldridge would like to get her hands on for one of her transformations? "I would love to transform Rob Ford," she says. "He could look just like Pamela Wallin, you know, they have the same round face."

Aldridge is not planning on retiring anytime soon. "I see twenty-five more years," Aldridge says, smiling. "That's not too unbelievable, is it? After all, I'm pretty happy doing what I'm doing. I used to think, what if people stop crossdressing? What would I do for a living? But I know that they're not going to stop."

Take a Walk on the Wildside, 161 Gerrard Street East, [www.wildside.org](http://www.wildside.org).

*Jeffrey Luscombe is a freelance writer and author of the novel Shirts and Skins. He is also the creator and author of The Gay Groom blog ([www.jeffreyluscombe.com](http://www.jeffreyluscombe.com)).*

