

High school confidential

When Tom was back in junior high school, the peer pressure was at its worst.

"If someone called me a fruit, I'd go home and find my most macho clothes and put them on."

Now a senior at a high school in Dartmouth, N.S., he considers himself a minority within a minority: a young gay person with a positive view of his sexual orientation.

by Jeff Harrington
Canadian University Press

Tom is not his real name. While his family and friends know he is gay, coming out at his "extremely homophobic" school is simply not an option. At least not a healthy one.

Ironically, he's seen by other students as a womanizer. But he's not about to let on he hasn't really had a girlfriend since grade nine.

"The moment you walk through that door, you have a challenge," he says. "You have to be a jock to succeed. You can't just have a girlfriend, you have to have X number of girlfriends."

After consoling himself for years with the thought his homosexuality was "just a phase," Tom came to terms with himself in grade 10. But what is high school like for students who are simply terrified they may be lesbian or gay?

"I think it would be pure hell."

THE INVISIBLE MINORITY

On the rare occasions people talk about how much of the population is homosexual, the figure of 10 per cent is often bandied about. But sexuality isn't exactly cut and dried. In her 1988 book *Often Invisible: Counselling Gay and Lesbian Youth*, Toronto psychologist Margaret Schneider cited a 1980 study that estimated almost 40 per cent of adults are either homosexual, bisexual, or have had same-sex contact or feelings at least once.

But the historical fact (and present reality) of homosexuality doesn't often make it through society's heterofilter.

"Gay people only exist on the news once in a while in a protest or on Oprah Winfrey," says J.C. Aucoin of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Nova Scotia (GALA). "Everybody tiptoes around the subject if they deal with it at all."

The Halifax School Board would rather not deal with it at all.

Last week, the board refused to let a university radio reporter interview students and staff at two city high schools about lesbian and gay students.

"There are certain things that are not perhaps age- or culturally appropriate — this would certainly be one of them," says Gordon Young, the city's education director.

Young says the "insensitive" request might put students in an "uncomfortable" position with their peers.

But Chrystn James, the reporter at Dal-

housie station CKDU who submitted the written proposal, says lesbian and gay high school students are already in an uncomfortable position.

"We don't really have a place," he says of his years in schools on Nova Scotia's South Shore. "Unfortunately, if I had questions about being gay, I couldn't go to my best friend or Joe down the hall, because I might get my head kicked in."

He certainly didn't find any answers in the classroom, where except for the odd reference made by a teacher, the curriculum is sanitized of the subject.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

Not so the hallways and schoolyards. Fag, queer and dyke became the insults of the 80s, aimed at anyone, gay or straight, whether they remotely fit a stereotype or not.

"If someone got on your nerves, the first thing you called them was a fruit," says James.

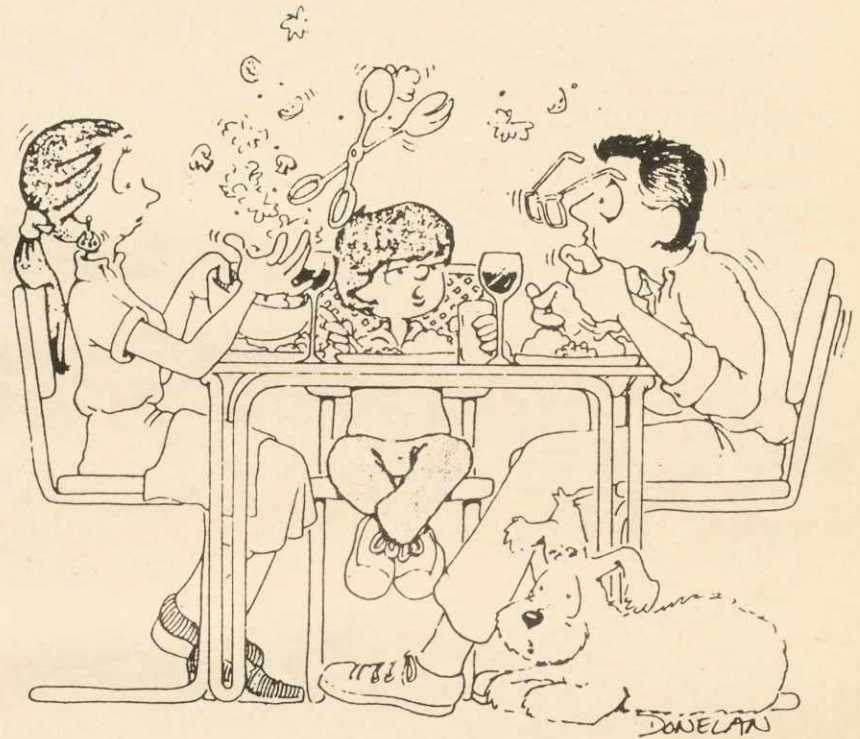
GALA's Aucoin says that long before students really understand what sexual orientation is, many have already formed a hostile attitude toward homosexuality.

"They have this concept that this category, whatever it actually means, is sinful, hateful and in some cases illegal," he says.

"I was accused for years and years of being this kind of perverse human being," says James. "And I denied it for years and years, because every mention of it was negative."



Graphic/The Fulcrum



I hope you realize that your heterosexuality will not necessarily prejudice my eventual affectional-preference choice.

The incessant "propaganda" works, says Aucoin. He cites studies in New York and Winnipeg showing lesbian and gay youth to have a suicide rate three to five times that of straight kids. The Winnipeg study, done earlier this year by the city's Gay and Lesbian Youth Services Network, found two-thirds of those studied had considered suicide and most wished they'd been taught something about homosexuality in school.

Jacqueline doesn't seem like the suicidal type. In fact, one of her friends says she's "almost too well-adjusted." But the student at J.L. Ilsley High School near Halifax admits she had a hard time accepting she wasn't "the norm."

"I was really paranoid. I missed a lot of school at one point — I was really pre-occupied with it."

She says lesbians at her school have a relatively easy time "because most times no one can tell."

"Eventually, it's almost becomes like a game," she says. "I'll have a guy hit on me, and I'll sit back and laugh: if only he knew."

But all is not roses for Jacqueline. She told her father. He kicked her out of the house.

"I'm just glad I didn't come out (to him) at an earlier age, because financially, it wouldn't have been good."

She now lives on her own, works, and goes to school.

Anthony goes to Queen Elizabeth High, smack dab in the middle of Halifax. It's "not so bad" compared to his old school (J.L. Ilsley), where the harassment got physical more than once.

He's learned to "block out" the insults.

"It's not too much of a problem here, there are a lot of different minority groups at the school."

But he says there is a lot of ignorance about homosexuality among teachers and students at the school.

"Somehow, homosexuality should be incorporated into the curriculum — it should be discussed in a positive way," he says.

CHANGE THE SUBJECT

J.C. Aucoin agrees wholeheartedly that what he calls gay-positive information — facts — has to be made accessible for students. The only problem — homophobia aside — is that controversy seems to make a lot of people in Nova Scotia, well, queasy...

- There was the student group in Windsor, N.S., that invited people to speak on lesbian and gay issues. The principal refused to announce it on the PA system, in case all the students "got out of control"

- The school board that instructed teachers to "discontinue a conversation at the nearest opportune time" if a sensitive issue came up

- Then there is the draft human rights policy of the Halifax County-Bedford School Board that can't quite bring itself to say "sexual orientation" — try "lifestyle diversity" on for size

"Nobody wants any controversy, they don't want the flak they assume would result," says Aucoin, who points out a Gallup poll five years ago said 71 per cent of Atlantic Canadians favored "basic human rights" for gays and lesbians. "They'll do anything to avoid a confrontation."

Jacqueline thinks it will be "quite a few years" before anyone can come safely out of the closet and walk down a high school hall. In the meantime, she too would like to see some education about homosexuality — and more about it on TV.

Aucoin agrees straight people must start learning that lesbian and gay people exist.

"How many kids know that at least two Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are named after gay men?"

Don't tell the school board.