

Comment:

A gay orientation

by Glenn Walton

To aid new arrivals, in finding their way around this great sprawling modern labyrinth called a university, the Student Union of Dalhousie publishes a Handbook every year.

Surprisingly in this, the most commercial of all possible worlds: the book is free of charge.

Well, you think, having just paid your tuition, at these rates, it's the least they can do.

Anyway, being free, it's probably no good. You can imagine how they go on about how great Dalhousie is, how lucky you are to study here, what a great president we have, etc., etc.

You open it and still more surprising yet it's good, being informative, critical of those things deserving criticism. Something for everyone, so much so that the imagination begins to fly away with reason. There are so many interesting societies and clubs and activities to choose from.

You can take up photography, write for the Dal Gazette, go out for sports or drama, join a political party, join a German, French, Spanish or Russian club.

Halfway through the booklet you have already begun to prune and clip, separating the things you'd sort of like to get into from what you absolutely want to do and can fit in with your courses.

At this point in your musings, a new word, in big, sober black lettering springs out at you from the page: **Sexuality**. Maybe you didn't expect it in an official publication, but maybe again you did. Something for everyone, remember? Besides, you can sometimes well use the information they're bound to provide on V.D., birth control, and abortion.

But, wait, what's this? just after a short intro, to start things off: Gay Halifax? A section on homosexuality? Men who love men, and women who love women? You learn that there's a group at Dal called GLAD, pushing for a gay studies programme, fighting discrimination and so on; that there's another one with headquarters on Barrington Street, along with a bookstore and a disco. Then some rather ominous words on cruising and its dangers. Other than the last item, a rather harmless and hardly threatening page and a half (no doubt considered by some to be a great concession to this particular minority.) No insidious assaults on heterosexual hegemony are being planned in Halifax, thank God; our children are safe.

(I exaggerate, I hear you say. Maybe. Most, I assume, were a bit surprised, and perhaps a

bit uneasy upon reading the page and a half, but not about to join Anita in her Holy Crusade against degeneracy. All that sort of stuff happens south of the border, where the spectre of crypto-Fascism periodically feels the need to raise its ugly head and sweep the land clean of such un-American and obviously Communist-inspired vermin.

Certainly my reaction to this part of the handbook was different than the above. I was surprised, but also quite pleased. You, see, I happen to be gay, and although I expected a relatively relaxed attitude towards sexuality and its many manifestations on campus, I didn't expect much from it either.

Obviously someone from the Gay Community has been working overtime, and I'm glad they have been because only we gays can effect change in the dominant opinion that we are perverted, sick, and weird.

What opinion was that? you ask, and what's all this talk about discrimination? "I never bother them, as long as they don't bother me, so what's the problem?" If you really want to know, get this . . . It's early afternoon and I have just had a sandwich and juice in the SUB cafeteria. Despite having paid an exorbitant price for the snack (I was not unwarned; see the handbook) and feeling rather good that I managed to successfully register this morning, I wander into the lounge off the lobby.

There are balloons hanging near the door, perhaps as a general welcome, or perhaps there's to be a social evening or party. Balloons are at best a questionable decoration for a university celebration, more suited to a children's party, I think, as I prepare to exit. But just before the door my ear catches a word or two from a group that is sitting in the corner talking. I hear the word "gay", and "Turret" (a club) and realize that someone is reading from the Handbook.

I stop. A man is reading quite loudly, and the others, who are draped over the chairs in a circle around him, are all laughing rather loudly at his performance. Thier laughter is not refined but rather of the guffaw, laughing-at-instead-of-with type. This is enemy territory, I realize, as I sit down. My heart beats faster as I listen.

I am not a tape recorder, and this is not a verbatim account of what went on, but I have not put words into anyone's mouth, the sense of which was not there already.

Group leader (reading loudly): "Gay men have traditionally met by 'cruising' certain areas of town. The Citadel has been

a gay cruising ground for over 200 years. (This, mysteriously, causes great amusement. Perhaps the idea of hanky-panky among the garrisons guarding the new colony is too incongruous a thought for those who think Oscar Wilde invented homosexuality.) More recently, activity has centered on the 'triangle', an area bordered by Queen Street (oddly, the pun goes unnoticed) Spring Garden Road and Dresden Row. He reads (with gusto). Cruising can be very dangerous. Gays are often harassed or beaten by heterosexual punks ("queer bashers") or by the police. . . . 'didja hear that? 'Heterosexual punks', Jesus! (Great indignation all around on this. Apparently he cannot disassociate the two words in his mind to understand that, as not all homosexuals are child molesters, not all heterosexuals are 'punks').

He continues. . . . " . . . during the summer many gay friendships (sarcasm) blossom in the Public Gardens." (The thought of two people meeting in the public gardens and becoming friends is perhaps too much for him, for he puts down the book with a few more grunts of disgust. A discussion follows, revealing that none of these (presumably) students in a modern university has actually known, much less talked with, a homosexual about the subject. I begin to stir, a protest on my lips.)

Young woman: " . . . but these people are obviously sick." (I believe by now to be on the moon. What do you say to a person who thinks you're sick?)

Second young man: (eager to establish his heterosexual credentials) " . . . I think that they're born with it too, so there's nothing you can do about it."

Young Woman: "I don't agree. I believe (contradicting herself) it's all in society. . . ."

Young man: "You mean in their upbringing?"

Young woman: "Yes, in the psyche, you know." (Probably meaning 'psychology')

Young man: "I don't agree. . . ."

First man: (who had been reading) "Well, I'd hit one myself." (Frankly, I don't believe my ears. I begin to boil.)

First woman: (who has been fixing balloons, adopting an above-the-battle posture): "Well, you know, after this, they'd obviously print anything in the handbook. . . ."

I burst, like one of her balloons. There is a palpable shock as a field of tension is suddenly created between me and their circle. My own indignation surprises me, as the words come out slowly and directly:



Me: "Sitting here listening to you people talk is really incredible. I am shocked. . . really, really, shocked. You obviously don't know anything about what you're talking. I'm gay . . . and have been listening to you saying all these terrible things about people like me without any sort of acquaintance with them. It's shocking to hear students at a university talk like this, you know. As long as people think like you do there will never be a change in attitudes." (The sweat is rolling down, but the speech is over. There is a long pause. I am lousy at speech making, and relieved when the second guy immediately begins to back track. The guy is apologetic even, as he begins to tout the gay cause.)

Boy: " . . . and they had that meeting last summer. That wouldn't have been possible five years ago."

ME: "Okay, but I don't think people's attitudes have changed much. For one (looking at the woman) I don't consider myself to be sick. And why you (looking at first man), would want to hit me I can't imagine."

First man: "I didn't mean it like it sounds. I only meant if anyone tried anything, I'd let him have it. (Once again the molester's role. Wherever do they get it?)

Me: "Listen, I've been attacked myself, and I have all sorts of friends who have too and ended up in the hospital. Gangs come into parks and attack us . . . Do you agree with that?"

First man: "Did you try anything? (This is asked in all seriousness.)

Man: "Just think how the Negroes were treated in the States, and how far they've come. It's like that. Someday, I think it will be accepted."

Woman: (now all the liberal, showing contempt for the oppressors of the black): "But they've got a long way to go yet."

Man: "But they don't have to go the back of the bus and all that anymore. . . ." (I have to go, don't have time to tell them how many times a day you feel isolated and insulted in a heterosexual society which prohibits open homosexual behavior, not just by law (We're not protected by

the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act, the handbook informs us) but on every level of society. If you don't believe it, try living for just one day, one hour even, as an open homosexual, and see how people react. Apply for a job or an apartment as one, or go into the SUB and listen to Dalhousie students talking about you. It's quite an education.

Comment is an opinion column open to members of the University community who wish to present an informed opinion on a topic of their selection.

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