

“What will the neighbours think?”

BY MARK REYNOLDS

Perhaps you've seen a couple of episodes of *Ellen*. Perhaps you've been to Reflections on a Saturday night. Perhaps you've flipped open *the Coast* and had a chuckle at Dan Savage's column.

Or maybe you've seen two men walking down the street and quickly looked the other way. Or quietly agreed when certain parliamentarians say homosexuals don't deserve "special" rights. Or, without thinking, called someone a fairy when they can't throw a ball hard enough.

something more than friendship, and often when they are recognized as that it can lead to...verbal attacks," she said.

"[It] happens at Dal, just like it happens everywhere. I have been yelled at as I'm walking down the street."

"There's a certain amount a safety in being away from your home town and away from a place where people have known you forever and have known your family...there's the worry of 'what will the neighbours think?'" she said.

"We live in a world where if your child is gay, it's the parents fault somehow — which is untrue, but that still plays into it."

Marc, a gay man from rural Newfoundland, agrees that the pressures of home for a young gay person can be too much.

"Growing up was hellish in a lot of ways. I

thought I was the only gay person in my area, my Dad made numerous comments...like 'AIDS is a cure for fags,' or 'all fags should be shot'...I was forced to hide. I had relationships with women — one for four years."

Marc feels that Nova Scotia has come a long way in its treatment of gay issues. The province now extends same sex benefits to civil service employees. But in health care and education, there are still areas where LGBTQ partners do not receive the same benefits or treatment given to others.

The unequal treatment extends beyond the law to society.

"A lot of times two women together are portrayed in pornography, and some people get the idea that my sexuality is for the pleasure of onlookers, and that's not the case," Pam said.

And Ann-Marie pointed out that not all orientations are valued the same, that homosexual relationships are seen as less valid than heterosexual ones.

"Even in my family, where we didn't grow up [being taught] that [homosexuality] was a sin, I find that if my sister is dating a man there is much more attention focused on [her] relationship than on my relationships. There's the attitude that 'if we don't ask about it, then we don't have to talk about it,'" she said.

"Attitudes are changing slowly. Queer issues, lesbian, gay and bisexual, and to a limited degree, transgendered people are becoming more visible in the world. But you still [have] huge institutions telling you that this is a sin, it's wrong. [This] affects how an individual person can live their life."

LGBTQ people can also find that even when they are not being actively discriminated against, their identity is seen as being something more than that of a heterosexual person. Day to day things that straight people take for granted are seen as extraordinary.

"I still have really close friends that ask me, 'well, what do you do in bed?' or 'do you hold hands in

restaurants?'" Pam said.

Those in the LGBTQ community are confronted every day with their sexuality. Coming 'out' is not — as in *Kids in the Hall* — just a matter of yelling to the world 'I'm gay!'

"You never have to come 'out' as a heterosexual...but when you come 'out' as something other than a heterosexual...that piece of your identity is given so much more attention," Ann-Marie said. She added that L G B Q T individuals are constantly dealing with the assumption that they are by something they are not.

"The whole idea of coming 'out' is that you're never fully 'out'. Coming 'out' is a life long process that never ends...Someone walking down the street may assume I'm something that I'm not. Do I tell my boss, do I tell my friends, do I tell the person who asks me on a date?...When you're assumed to be something you're not, you can never be fully 'out'."

But being 'out' is important for more than just an individual's peace of mind. If one person is in the closet, and their partner is not, it can complicate a relationship.

"I've dated people that weren't 'out' at all, and that's a huge stress because, when it comes down to a relationship someone has to compromise. I have to compromise in order to appease the public — in order to appease people I don't even know," Pam said.

Marc says being 'out' can be a great service to young people coming to terms with their sexuality, especially when information on LGBTQ issues is limited in the community.

"I realize now that all the things that I had thought were unattainable...such as a long term meaningful relationship, being able to hold a good job, holding all the morals and values that I did before [coming 'out'] are possible. A lot of people, the only pictures they receive [while growing up] are the dirty old man, or the screaming [drag] queen, so they don't feel there's any hope, of...ever being happy."

Despite all the obstacles and complications of having a different sexual orientation, each person interviewed was happy, and proud to be 'out'.

"It wasn't until I came 'out' that I knew what true happiness was, and now I'm happy to say that the last four years have been absolutely wonderful...I'm proud to be gay and I wouldn't change at all," Marc said.

"If I could wake up tomorrow and be straight, I wouldn't."

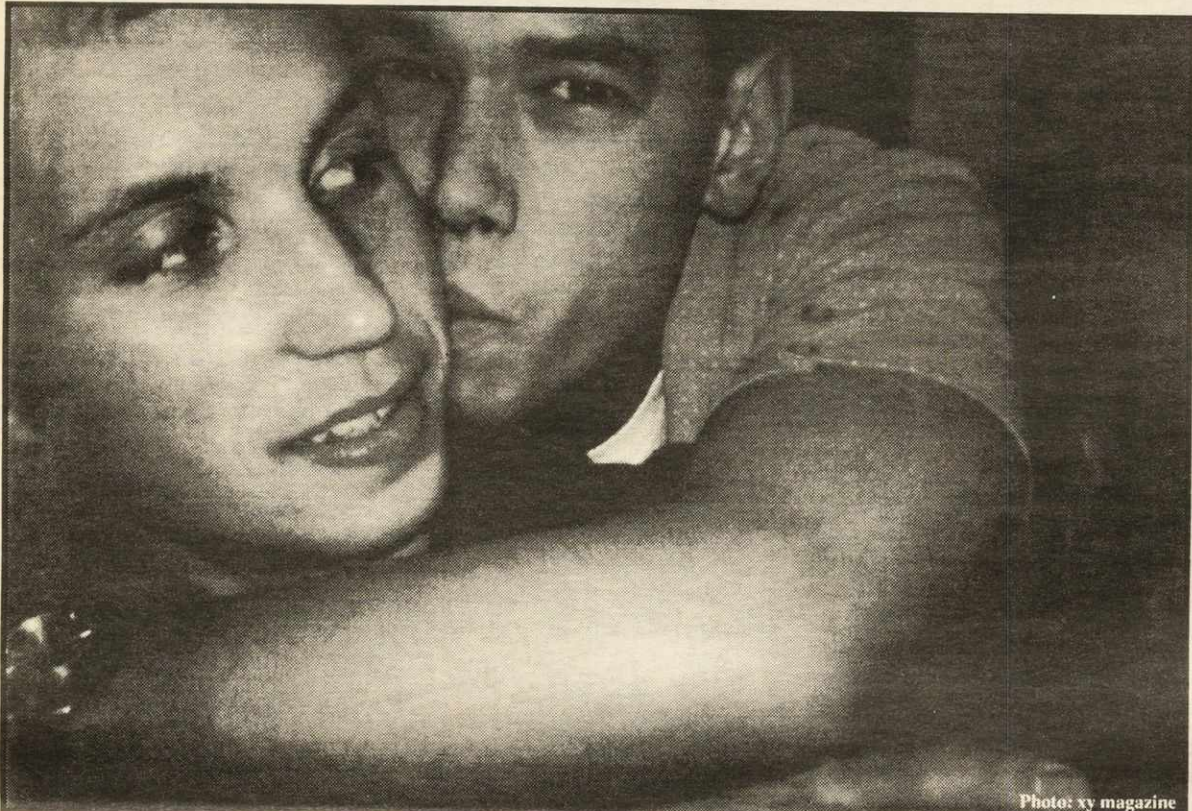


Photo: xy magazine

What is BGLAD?

For the first time in nearly two years, Dalhousie has an on-campus group at Dalhousie for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual people.

Bisexuals, Gays and Lesbians at Dalhousie (BGLAD) has been up and running after a hiatus of nearly two years. The organization has been around since the late seventies.

"It's a social and support group for [lesbian, gay and bisexual] Dal students...the only requirement [to take part] is that you be gay-positive and attend a post-secondary institution," said Angela Barrette, BGLAD's president.

BGLAD boasts a membership of about 60 people who attend a variety of schools in metro.

"We try to educate ourselves on issues in the community," Barrette said, adding that the group holds frequent workshops on issues of concern to the membership.

The group also does workshops for the Dalhousie community, as well as network with other lesbian, gay and bisexual groups in the city.

"We're open to new ideas...if we're not doing something now, it's probably because it's never been brought up."

The group can be contacted either at BGLAD@is2.dal.ca or in its office on the third floor of the Dalhousie Student Union Building.

Maybe you feel that you understand gay issues in the nineties, or maybe you wish they would all go away.

But the nineties, more than any other decade, has been very kind to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and transgendered (LGBTQ) community. Nova Scotia, and Halifax in particular, has made great strides in acceptance of the gay community. But society, and the law, still has much catching up to do.

"When I was in high school, I saw Halifax as the land of green," said Pam, a lesbian who moved here from a small town to attend university.

"I saw my life as beginning when I came here. I could finally start living my life the way that I felt was right for me."

Pam said that in the town she came from, there were very few people who were open about being gay — very few people who were 'out'. Still, her family, friends, and for the most part, her school, were very supportive.

Halifax was not the bed of roses she had envisioned.

"On my first night in Halifax...four or five guys surrounded me and cold-cocked [punched] me...I didn't realize people could be so mean. I was really naive."

Ann-Marie, a queer feminist, also said that although things have progressed, there are still barriers that need to be broken down.

"We're not at the point where lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people are widely accepted...we're in a largely heterosexist society that doesn't even recognize our relationships with members of the same sex as

Ann-Marie also says that although she will confront people who verbally attack her, not everyone in the LGBTQ community is able to do that. Harassment scares many silent.

Elinor, a queer woman who grew up in a small town, said, "I tend to ignore people who yell at me...it's a defence mechanism from when I was little...I've been teased and harassed since I can remember."

Elinor's experiences growing up in a small town caused complications in her life even before she came out to anyone.

"In a small town everyone knows everyone else...after my Mom and Dad got divorced, there was a rumour going around town that my Mom and a friend of her's were lesbians. I lived a very sheltered life...there was no mention of homosexuality or lesbianism...and with my Mom's religion we were taught that homosexuality was wrong. I hate keeping secrets from my Mom. I feel that there's a whole part of my life that I can't share with her."

Family rejection and small town isolation are some of the most immediate problems facing the LGBTQ community in Nova Scotia. But these problems go deeper than just a feeling of being alone. Between 30 and 60 per cent of suicides under the age of 24 are related to sexual orientation. And 40 percent of all youth on the street identify themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual.

"The biggest thing we get are calls from people in rural areas that are completely isolated...calls from people being harassed," said Leigh Ann Wichman, a volunteer at the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Youth Project, which provides support and educational services.