

Lesbigay Youth: Growing Up In the 90's - Part I

The Stonewall Riots of 1969 began the Lesbigay Movement that challenged the social order's discrimination of homosexual and bisexual people. Now, in the 1990's, that Movement continues to make progressive steps in the fight for equality in mainstream society. Yet, this ripple in time is also fraught with numerous challenges and obstacles of its own. The growing anti-gay movement, the frightening spectre of AIDS, the challenge of positive lesbigay role models and the intolerance of the larger society do take their toll. Perhaps the key importance at this stage, are the future generations of lesbigays who will take up the double-edged mantle of pride and discrimination. Lesbigay youths are facing some difficult decisions in their future as the struggle towards equality persists. In addition, there appears to be specific stressors that lesbigay youths face that their heterosexual counterparts do not. In 1994, Ritch C. Savin-Williams highlighted the verbal and physical stressors that lesbian, gay male and bisexual youth faced in everyday life which made them more susceptible to problems in school, suicide, substance abuse and so on. Furthermore, in 1986, Margaret Schneider and Bob Tremble discussed issues faced by social workers when dealing with confused adolescents. Their study indicated that the confusion regarding sexual orientation, adolescence and the coming out process is a large process that many youth care workers need to examine and discuss. Several factors make things difficult and rewarding for lesbigay youth in the 90's.

To begin, youths everywhere undergo several trials in their lives. Prime among them is the burgeoning changes which come with adolescence. The numerous physiological, psychological and social changes that are taking place are difficult enough to accept; add sexual orientation to the mix and it becomes even more difficult. This is due to the social perceptions of homosexuality and bisexuality as pervasively negative by a number of society's agents. Certain religions, laws, governments, educational institutions, and so on remain adamant about the negative effects and consequences of becoming "one of them." Youths are socialized within this context and, as a result, lesbigay youths encounter a hostile environment in which they must find their place.

Ann Heron's anthology of lesbigay youth, *Two Teenagers In Twenty*, presents a first-hand account of the social forces at play when lesbigay youths decide to come out. The stories provide positive and negative situations encountered by lesbigay youths throughout their lives. Being thrown out of the house, running away, disowned, accepted unconditionally, given a supportive environment or finding a positive role model are just a few things that youths have dealt with in the acceptance of their sexual identity. This is also reflected in Bennet L. Singer's *Growing Up Gay/Growing Up Lesbian*, which features several people's memorable "coming out" stories. The memories of youth stand out as a testimony to their courage to accept who they were in the face of social pressures to remain hidden.

A second important factor in lesbigay youth acceptance and coming out is the reactions of parents to the fact that their son or daughter is gay, lesbian or bisexual. The prime feature here is the coming out to the family; a worrisome pressure in an already stressful adolescence. Coming out to parents is a large step, but one that involves a particular worry for lesbigay youths. The family is the last bastion of protection and comfort in a sometimes hostile world. If that comfort is taken away or threatened then youths tend to feel lost and alone. Small wonder then, that some youths who are dealing with a sexual orientation crisis come out to friends first, then family members.

Ann Muller presented a rich selection of parent-child relationships in her 1987 book, *Parents Matter: Relationships with Lesbian Daughters and Gay Sons*. The responses of various parents to their child's homosexuality or bisexuality are as varied as the relationships themselves. Both positive and negative consequences have arisen from these parent-child interactions, yet there have been other things that have developed. Initially parents' reactions may be negative but, over time, become positive; the same holds true for the reverse situation. For many parents the negative perceptions of society have ingrained too much for them to accept a son or daughter who is homosexual or bisexual. In other situations the liberal attitudes of the parents have paved the way for a more understanding relationship with their child. Lesbigay youths are therefore placed in a confusing array of social situations which demand they choose their actions within select social circumstances.

What could be done with this loaded predicament that many lesbigay youths encounter in life? Lucy R. Mercier and Raymond M. Berger state that we should let lesbigay youths tell their own stories in their own way. Youth care workers, families and friends should allow lesbian, gay and bisexual youth to come to terms with their sexuality, and provide a supportive environment in which they can explore and understand their growing sexual orientation. However, another influence upon lesbigay youth is the larger lesbigay community that preceded them in society. This topic will be discussed in next week's issue.

Happy Financial Awareness Week !!
In case you missed the palpable sense of excitement this week, the UNB Student Union has provided you with a chance to spend your week listening to bank and government officials talk to you about how to cope with debt, poverty and bankruptcy.

What's that? You say that the banks talking to students about coping with financial strain is a little like the Irving Pulp and Paper Mill giving Saint John residents workshops on breathing problems? But you digress!! Everyone is excited that the Scotiabank has helped universities across Canada sponsor this week long orgy of financial opportunity. They were so convinced that you would benefit from learning more about financial opportunities (provided at nominal costs by the—surprise!!—Scotiabank), they offered Student Union presidents across Canada free trips to Toronto so that they could come to understand how badly we needed a week to learn of the many services offered to us cheaply and altruistically by our friends at Scotiabank.

Even the UNB Board of Governors has gotten into the act with a little bonus gift. This week, as you learn about how to deal with crushing debt, the Old Arts Building set gave us a report from the President's Task Force on Tuition and Other Student Fee Policies.

Now, at first, one might be suspicious. After all, this is the group that gave us last year's university budget, which dealt with a \$2million government funding cut through the balanced, share-the-pain approach of... a \$2million tuition grab. That, of course, was during the old Robin Armstrong administration. Today, a new breeze is blowing the winds of change across our bridge to the 21st century, but I digress, with overwrought metaphors.

In fact, the task force was quite committed to righting a wrong. They discovered that since we all pay the same tuition, but some programs cost more than others to deliver, students taking

arts and law were paying a higher percentage of their program in tuition. Their solution can be aptly summed up by the following dramatization.

LANDLORD: Hey, you've been paying the same rent as the other tenants, but your apartment isn't as nice.
YOU: Hey, thanks for noticing!

LANDLORD: Well, I'm happy to tell you that we've fixed that problem.
YOU: Really? So how much will my rent go down?

LANDLORD: Well, heh, heh, er...
YOU: It is going down, isn't it?

LANDLORD: Um, actually, it's going up a hundred bucks. But, everyone else's is going up eight hundred bucks. So you'll have the satisfaction of thinking how much worse it could be!

YOU (sotto voce): Screw you.

That's right. To console those of you paying nearly three thousand bucks next year, you can watch those in science and engineering pay nearly four thousand bucks.

Yes. Now, this flies in the face of accepted logic. Differential fees have been justified with actual empirical evidence in two ways. One theory goes that those fields with higher earning potential can raise fees, since their students can borrow more. That's not the case here, where law students pay less than the more altruistic (and poorer) education and nursing students, who will shell out as much as \$3528 next year. The other argument is to lower fees for the first two years to break down psychological barriers for working class students. Here, that just isn't the case.

The report says that UNB should ensure accessibility, but except for some nice limits on ancillary fees, there's no effort to back it up with research or policy. They had the chance to look at ways to reduce university expenses to keep tuition down. Not one word. The section studying effects of tuition hikes on students is one paragraph long. They even ignored a recent MPHEC report that showed while more students are going to university overall, a smaller percentage are from middle or lower class backgrounds. The MPHEC will spend 20,000 dollars studying this problem. The UNB Administration barely gave it 20 words.

Now usually, when a report that ignores student concerns this completely is released, one asks if student leaders had their noses in the vicinity of someone's posterior. That is not the case here. In fact, the Student Union executive has an airtight alibi. Frankly, their heads were already up

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their own derires on this one. The executive knew that the task force was happening, and that students had been promised a seat on it. They even had a report from last year, unanimously endorsed by the Student Council, setting out alternatives to tuition hikes.

And they appointed no student, prepared no submission, and asked no questions. As this is written, the very capable Anthony Knight has, to his credit, begun responding and seeking to forward alternatives. He has a lot of work ahead if he is to reverse a very sorry direction in the student union.

Instead of working to change policy that hurts students by pushing our own ideas, the Student Union has chosen to instead give us events like Financial Awareness Week. We won't try and

change policy that hurts students, but we will make sure that those who make the policy explain it to you. We'll even bring in the author of the *Debt-Free Graduate*, who offers downscale Martha Stewart tips for the decamisados, such as attending events with free meals and where to get cheap used furniture. Don't fight student poverty, just do it with panache.

That's a shame, because lobbying for change is the only thing a Student Union can do which helps all students. There will always be those who, because of courses, part-time jobs, family commitments or other interests don't want to go to Union concerts, drop by and check out our services, read the *Brun*, or even take the time to vote in union elections.

But when student groups get tuition frozen, stop taxi fare hikes, get student loans untaxed or make more student loan money available (to use examples that really happened recently), then

students benefit from their hundred dollar SU fee whether they get involved or not. There have been some good innovations this year in the name of school spirit, like Winter Carnival, for which Arioushka Courage deserves a lot of credit. However, these events tend to overwhelmingly attract students who look like Union execs (from most years, not just this one) and their friends. Students who don't fit the mold would not have found much new this year that helps take on issues that matter to them.

Monique Scholten, speaking knowledgeably about last year's SU audits, said that she likes to look to the future not the past. As always, she gives sensible advice. But someone ought to remind the SU executive that the view doesn't change much when you're staring at your navel.

Another friend of mine, whose position on Americans I did not know until recently, spoke up on the phone the other night. He said, "I just generally don't like Americans, I have a personal problem with them." I briefly played with the idea of making him squirm by pointing out that he just insulted all of my ancestors. Instead, I maintained silence and wondered to myself if he'd met all of the billions of people he'd just decided were less worthy individuals than himself. I know he'd never met my grandmother, the most amazing woman I've ever met, nor had he met all of my exceptionally friendly cousins or my grandfather whose memory I cherish so fondly.

Like anyone else speaking out about injustices these days, I realize I'm largely wasting my time. This is especially true when defending the Americans, as, they need no defence. Not that they do nothing wrong, but that they're more than capable of defending themselves, as my black-eyed friend would happily show you.

So remember, my fellow Canadians, the next time you begin to insult the Americans, you may just be speaking to one.

Catherine Atern

Acceptable Canadian Bigotry

As I was walking out of class the other day I ran into a friend from residence. His face was cut just under the eye, it was obvious that he had been 'scrapping.' I asked him what happened, almost knowing the answer before he began to speak. "I felt the need to defend my country," was all he said.

He did not need to say more. What image comes to mind? Where do you assume he's from? A man from Pakistan, or perhaps Somalia? You may ask what bigots did this, who disgraced our country's reputation of acceptance and tolerance by insulting this man's homeland?

Right now across Canada we have an epidemic of hatred which scares me since everyone believes it to be acceptable. Somehow, while we don't feel entitled to insult Pakistanis, Somalis, the English, or anyone else, we feel entitled to hate Americans. My friend is an American. He has come to our country like any other foreign student, however, we feel that we don't have to respect him and his country as we would any other foreign student.

What strange national inferiority complex gives us the right to hate Americans? Are we so besieged by jealousy of their wealth and power that we give up all that we pride ourselves on when it comes to our Southern neighbours? Or are we so scared of becoming Americans that we can't simply be confident that we are actually quite different?

I find it entertaining to watch some ignorant Canadian rant about how distinct and separate our country is, and then feeling the need to prove it by insulting Americans. This outpour of racism is often coming from people who have only been to the United States once or twice, if they have gone at all. They are often those same people who have just gone to see Jerry Maguire, dutifully watch Saturday Night Live and simply love the most recent Seattle band. It isn't this person who scares me, but all of my fellow Canadians who support this view. The fellow Canadians who laugh freely

at this blatant bigotry. If this ignorant Canadian had just gone on about those "fucking Jews" instead of the "fucking Yanks" there would be hell to pay. Instead we just laugh.

Do we laugh because they're so close to us in both the values and the continent we share?

Sitting on the fence as I am allows me to be slightly more objective. I see the problems the Americans have, and there are certainly many of them, but I also see our problems. Problems which often are the same as those found South of the border, only diluted because of our much lower population density. Maybe before we begin to criticize the rest of the world, we should fix up some of our own messes. We point out that once the UN picked us as the number one place to live, but then we fail to mention that we are only in ninth place when it comes to the position of women in this country.

There is no question that there are many problems facing Americans today. Sometimes things seem so abhorrent "over there" that it is no surprise that we slightly more reserved, Canadians look askance at our Southern neighbours. Justifiably, we do not want to be like Americans, not culturally, politically, or any other -ally. However, this does not mean we have to hate them.



"I surfed the 'Net and got a job'."

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