

School is not a Gay Place to Be

SAVE
Lambda Rising



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As the clock drew nearer to ten o'clock, my fear became almost unbearable. I had long since stopped listening to my professor's lecture even though the material he was covering would undoubtedly be included on the final. The anxiety I was feeling made attention impossible. I remember sitting in the classroom shaking and dripping wet. I stared almost hypnotically at the second hand of the wall clock—suddenly the bell rang and class was over.

Now I had to make the most important decision of my life. Was I going to keep my appointment with the unknown woman in the college union or was I going to stand her up and retreat to the security of my apartment? As I made up my mind to carry through with the appointment, I found myself walking out of the room ignoring my classmates, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. I was worried that someone would ask where I was going.

I approached the union, trying to regain my composure. I knew that I couldn't face anyone in the condition I was in, and if I continued to look so agitated, everyone would stare at me once I entered the building. I took a deep breath and went inside. Then I looked all over the cafeteria for the woman with the green blouse and blue pants. This was the outfit she had told me she would wear when I talked to her over the phone four hours earlier.

Suddenly I saw her—she saw me at the same time and got out of her seat to greet me. She took my hand and brought me over to her table.

"You must be Warren," she said. "My name is Lee."

She was not at all as I had envisioned her. She had a kind, friendly face and long sensitive fingers. She spoke with an air of understanding which allowed me to relax in her presence. I wished, however, that we were alone somewhere instead of there in the cafeteria where at any time an acquaintance might come in and find out the nature of our

meeting.

"Lee," I said, "I called you because..." At this point I became extremely tense and could no longer continue.

"I know of your reasons for wanting to talk to me," she replied after almost an entire minute of silence. "I've found that many people are in your situation and are in such desperation that they don't know where to turn. Please try to continue where you left off a minute ago. It would really be helpful to you if you could get out the words that are so disturbing to you."

"Lee, I called you because...because I think I... I... I am a ho...a homosexual." At that moment I placed my head in my hands and wanted to flee as fast as I could. After a minute or so she took my hand, and as she did, I could see her own eyes swelling with tears. It seemed that she knew the torment and self-hatred which I was feeling because of the simple fact that she had gone through the same feelings herself.

I suppose that I have had "homosexual" feelings since I was seven or eight years old, but since that time until just a very few months ago I was afraid to admit it to anyone, including myself. This meeting with the GLF coordinator on my college campus was such a threatening thing to me because, like most of society, school is not a very "gay" place to be. For the homosexual in today's educational institutions, life is extremely oppressive, lonely and alienating.

The chain of sexual oppression imposed by my schooling started the very first day I entered kindergarten. As my mother dropped me off and kissed me good-bye, I felt very alone and began to cry. The teacher walked up and said in a rough voice: "Don't cry. Only sissies and little girls cry." In retrospect I realize that she was telling me to deny my feelings in order to fit a preconceived notion of masculinity, a norm I didn't fit and couldn't have fit if I had wanted to. Even back in kindergarten, boys were channelled in certain activities such as

athletics while girls were channelled along the lines of housekeeping "skills" such as cooking and cleaning up the classroom. This channelling seemed to grow more intense in each consecutive level of grade school.

In the fifth and sixth grades I was one of only five boys in the school chorus, which included almost 50 girls. The reason that more boys were not included in the chorus is not because girls generally have better voices than boys of elementary school age. The determining factor was one of social pressure. I and the other four boys in the chorus were referred to by our peers as "the chorus girls," while the girls who "made it" into the chorus were well respected and envied by the other girls of the school.

As I was experiencing this humiliation, I repeatedly wondered why it was that kickball was considered to be more "manly" than singing. Why was it that, in order for me to be accepted by my peers, I would first have to show my physical prowess on the athletic field?

The attitudes which my classmates developed were formulated within the family unit, but they were reinforced in the school setting. It was usually the girls who were encouraged by their teachers to take advantage of the field trips to the opera each semester, while the boys were pushed to attend a local big league baseball game. It was the girls who were allowed to help the teacher mix the paints for art period while the boys were permitted to sometimes leave for recess early to get the balls out of the equipment rooms. These instances may appear to be quite minor means of tracking a student according to sex, but they set the stage for the most oppressive three years of my life—the years of junior high school.

During this period I began to develop physically and became more aware of my own body. I began to have definite sexual feelings for other members of my own sex. These were feelings which I didn't exactly understand, although they seemed very real. Once I had a strong sexual attraction for a boy friend of mine. When I told him that I wanted to embrace him, he looked at me in the strangest way and called me a "faggot." By that time in my life I knew what the term meant. I was told that "faggots" are homosexuals who are sick and who must go to a psychiatrist in order to be "normal."

In junior high, "normal" was defined by the teachers of our sex education class—the physical education staff. During the course, homosexuality was discussed when we were on the topic of "sexual deviates." If nothing else, this course taught me to keep my homosexual feelings well hidden. Whenever any of my friends told homosexual jokes, I was always the one who laughed the loudest, so no one would discover where I was really at.

During these years, I hated to go to any school

dances. It was not that I didn't like to dance, but rather that I wanted to dance with the other boys. Once I had a fantasy of dancing with a boy friend of mine in the privacy of my own room—how beautiful and free it was to finally carry out my desires.

Unfortunately, this was only a fantasy, a brief vision instead of an actual occurrence. Subsequently, I rarely attended any of the dances because they were extremely threatening to me. If I were discovered, I not only wouldn't have been able to face my friends and relatives, but I thought that I would have to be transferred to another school so I wouldn't "disturb the educational environment" of my school. Recently this was what happened when a 13-year old told one of his junior high school teachers he was a homosexual. The principal immediately went to talk with his parents and stated that their son would not be allowed back to school unless he was admitted to a qualified psychologist for the purpose of altering his sexual preference. In this instance the parents accepted their son's feelings and were not intimidated by the school. They threatened that if their son was not admitted back to the school immediately they would file suit through the American Civil Liberties Union. Under this threat the boy was readmitted due to the lack of legal grounds for his dismissal.

In this type of case, in most states the law may be on our side, but social attitudes are difficult if not impossible to legislate. I have not kept up with this particular case since the boy has been back in school, but I do not doubt that he has felt some social stigma for his decision to be open about his homosexuality (as I would have, if I had been secure enough in my junior high school years to be open).

Junior high school sufficiently prepared me for my eventual high school experiences, teaching me never to question the oppressive conditioning I was subjected to. I did not question the military drills in tenth grade physical education class; in eleventh grade I did not question the transfer of a fellow classmate to a continuation school for alleged homosexual tendencies; and I did not question the statement of my twelfth grade English teacher that "even though Andre Gide was a homosexual he was a good author in spite of it." I felt too threatened to speak out. I tried, instead, to play the games social pressure dictated to me. I went steady with a girl in my history class when I was a senior mainly because all of my friends were going steady and I felt isolated for not having a girlfriend myself.

My own self-hatred was especially great in high school because I knew I was a homosexual but did not know how to handle it. There was no one to whom I could turn for help. Once in my health class when the subject came up, we talked about the technique of shock treatment for homosexuals to alter their "sexual desires." Being in such a des-

perate state, I even considered submitting myself to such treatment but, fortunately, never went through with it.

I graduated from high school with the hope that college life would somehow be different. I hoped that people would be more open-minded and readily open to change. To a great extent, this was true. In college, for the first time I joined with other people to demonstrate our open opposition to the war in Vietnam; now I felt the joy of joining with my Black and Chicano sisters in our common struggle against housing discrimination around our campus by the campus slumlords; now I was able to voice my disgust at the state of our ecology by helping to plan workshops during specified ecology teach-ins held around my campus.

All of these activities gave me a greater sense of worth, in that now I felt freer to act out many of my previously held ideals, but still something was missing. There remained within me a great void from which I could not escape. I knew the time was drawing near for me to make a decision of either coming out with my homosexuality to myself and to others, or else remaining in my suppressed state as I had done ever since I could remember. I continually asked myself why there were no openly Gay individuals or gay organizations on my campus.

Then one day in my campus newspaper I saw the headline, in big bold letters, **"Gay Liberation Front Denied Campus Recognition."** The article went on to say that the chancellor of the California State College system had denied recognition of the Campus Chapter of Gay Liberation Front on the premises that:

1. "...the effect of recognition by the college of Gay Liberation Front could conceivably be to endorse, or to promote homosexual behavior, to attract homosexuals to the campus, and to expose minors to homosexual advocacy and practices, and
2. "...belief that the proposed Front created too great a risk for students—a risk which might lead students to engage in illegal homosexual behavior."

After my initial disgust and outrage for such absurd reasoning, I finally chose to "come out of my closet." I soon joined an encounter group in the college counseling center which allowed me to gain the support I needed to start to handle my homosexuality in a constructive way. Soon I gained the courage I needed to get in touch with the coordinator of the local Gay Liberation Front chapter, as described in the beginning of this article. Since that time I have been involved heavily in gay politics and gay sensitivity groups.

The void is finally being filled because now I have found people who are proud of their homosexuality—people who are no longer going to put up with the oppressive conditions which our society

imposes on us every day of our lives. People are now fighting in the courts to get chapters of Gay Liberation Front reinstated on campuses. A precedent case was recently decided in our favor by the Superior Court of Sacramento County, California. In this case, the GLF, represented by the Associated Students of Sacramento State College, won a suit against the President of Sacramento State College and the trustees of the California State College System which forced the state college to recognize GLF as a student organization. A court upheld the Associated Students' contention that:

To justify suppression of free speech there must be reasonable grounds to fear that serious evil will result if free speech is practiced. There must be reasonable ground to believe that the danger apprehended is imminent.

Using this precedent, other homosexual groups which have been denied recognition are now waging court battles throughout the nation. Also many groups have not had as much trouble as we have had for there are over 150 campus homosexual groups throughout the United States. The purpose, as stated in one group's constitution, is

...to further self-understanding among the members, to promote in the community better understanding of homosexuality, and to facilitate a strengthening of social ties between homosexuals and heterosexuals...to provide... members with legal, medical and psychological counseling and services as is necessary and proper.

To be a homosexual in the educational institutions of this country is still extremely difficult even though conditions may appear to be changing for the better. I was able to begin the long process of personal liberation in spite of my teachers and the educational institutions.

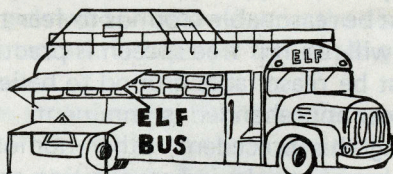
I realize that I can talk only of oppression from the viewpoint of a homosexual man, but the system which oppresses me also oppresses women, both gay and straight, Black people, Chicanos, Native Americans and others. The fact which must be made known is that we are tired of waiting for change; we are tired of hiding our feelings and we are rising up with pride, love and solidarity.

Warren Blumenfeld grew up in a suburb of Los Angeles, California where he attended public school and Los Angeles Valley College. He later graduated from San Jose State College where he received a teacher's credential in 1970. Although he eventually plans to teach music in a free school, he is presently working on the staff of the Center for Educational Reform and works part time for the National Student Association, helping to set up a national resource center for gay students.

edcentric

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