

BiNet News

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I'M BISEXUAL AND I HAVE PARENTS:

Bisexual Activists take on the National PFLAG Conference

by Lani Ka'ahumanu

Over 900, mostly European-American folks filled the downtown Hyatt Regency Hotel to attend the 13th International Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) Convention over Labor Day weekend. Participants ranged from the tentative, wide-eyed newly out parents who were taken in by the openness of the gay friendly and supportive atmosphere, to the "old timers" with shirts and blouses adorned with red ribbons and political buttons declaring "I love my lesbian daughters" and "Love Makes a Family." These were the seasoned organizers and activists within the PFLAG family.

On the scale of one to ten, the people watching was a 10+! Combinations of urban, suburban and rural parents, and parents and their children streamed through the main conference area.

A leather man in full drag with his arm around his dad's shoulder chatted with his smiling mother. A young man with magenta hair and multiple piercings held his mother's hand as they strolled through the information area. Young dykes no more than 14 years old giggled as they observed the scene. Camp Lavender Hill, a summer camp for children of queers displayed photographs and sold t-shirts. There were rainbow flag watches, PFLAG mugs, a poster of "Famous lesbians, gays, and bisexuals throughout history" and queer books and videos for days. For many parents coming to San Francisco was a little like landing in OZ - they definitely knew they weren't in Kansas anymore. The theme "Bridges to Equality" was stamped on canvas bags that attendees

filled with goodies gathered at the information and merchandise tables.

Even though bisexual visibility was low in the workshop department (only two), the POL, Bay Area Bisexual Network and BLUR information table made up for the lack. Our table was hard to miss among the many groups represented at the conference. Dannielle Raymond, founding mother and one of the core organizers of BLUR (a social and support group for bisexual youth and their friends) made a huge banner for our table and complementing stickers proclaiming - **I'm Bisexual and I Have Parents**. This message was the perfect theme. Inevitably people would stop in their tracks, pause to think about it, and then smile and nod. The official conference videographer came by and took a close-up shot of the banner. All of us wore the astrobrite stickers carrying the theme one step further. Parents took the stickers for their children or sometimes even put them on.

We were in the business of high visibility, schmoozing, answering questions, and networking while pointing out all the bisexual literature, resources and information on the table. Wayne Bryant, board member of the Boston based Bisexual Resource Center (BRC) sent brochures and the International Directory which rounded out the array of bisexual information on display. The BiNET USA newsletters, back issues of the magazine *Anything That Moves* (ATM), a bibliography of articles and books, the Klein Scale, the bisexual myths and stereotypes and the brochures were almost gone within the first three hours on Friday afternoon! A new supply of ATMs and more copies had to be made for the next two days.

The crowd was a joy. I worked for several hours all three days. They were thanking us, while at the same time we were thanking them! So many sweet sincere savvy people who love their queer children so fiercely they came out in great numbers to attend this

Ron Fox mentions "gay, lesbian and bisexual people" at his workshop and his interrupted by a hip elderly Midwestern woman who calls out, "And Transgender! Don't forget Transgender!"

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conference. Most wanted as much information as they could get their hands on to take back home to share with those who couldn't make it. One man with a low key unemotional attitude strolled slowly and deliberately over to our table. As he checked out the information, he told us in a quiet monotone voice that his son "was bisexual." He then smiled and shook his head saying he keeps telling him to "settle down with a nice boy." We couldn't figure him out, but smiled attentively and waited out the pregnant silence. The guy's face finally lit up. He chuckled and confided in us that he himself was gay! We all burst into laughter.

So many of these parents are lefty activists and organizers from the forties, fifties and sixties. Easy to spot, they immediately began talking strategies. One woman said her son had been out for 16 years, so she "didn't need the support groups anymore," but "just loved the organization and the people so much" she decided "to start a speakers bureau. Parents go into the high schools to speak to the issues." What a brilliant strategy, I thought. The radical right would be hard pressed getting these regular everyday heterosexual parents kicked out of the schools. In her fabulous Long Island accent, she continued proudly telling us that a picture of her marching with a sign "I LOVE MY GAY SON" was in the NY Times just after the 1987 March on Washington. She returned several hours later to show two other women all our information. They were beside themselves talking about adding books and the resource guides to their libraries and joining BiNET USA and subscribing to *Anything That Moves* and purchasing the International Directory and on and on! We were a Bi 101 oasis! Gay and lesbian tablers came over to pick up information and talk with us too.

Bisexual ally extraordinaire Amity Buxton, Ph.D., author of [The Other Side of the Closet](#), invited bisexual activists and research psychologists Valerie Stone, Ph.D. and Ron Fox, Ph.D. to join her for the "Understanding Bisexuality" panel. Stefan Lynch asked Danielle Raymond to sit on the panel for "Children of Gay and Lesbian Parents." Behind the scenes lobbying regarding the low visibility of bisexuals and our particular issues paid off. Fortunately at the last minute there was a cancellation so space was available for a second bisexual workshop - "I'm Bisexual and I Have Parents."

I immediately called my friend, bisexual writer and activist Michael Szymanski in Los Angeles on the very outside chance that he and his mother (who had been with him at the 1993 March on Washington) would be

at the PFLAG conference. Not only was his mother Rose from Miami going to be there, but Michael's childhood friend Tigger Newman, a bisexual activist from Mountain View CA, and his mother Ginger from Hawaii were going to be having a reunion at the conference! Ginger and Rose hadn't seen each other in 20 years!! Talk about synchronicity, talk about the planets being aligned, talk about outrageous luck, we were psyched! What a coup!

I was unable to attend the two bi-specific workshops, but Valerie Stone reported the panelists talked about coming out issues; said that yes, bisexuals can be monogamous; pointed out that since many bisexuals were previously gay or lesbian, bisexuality is no more a phase than anything else, that people can and do change; stressed that a gay and lesbian child who gets involved with a member of the opposite sex is not going straight; and talked about bisexuality and marriage. That is basically what was put out there. And what was the feedback? Valerie felt "there were positive responses and some people said they understood better, even if they didn't understand completely. Other people left feeling more confused, and some people were quite upset about bisexuality." When Ron Fox asked the audience how many people were aware that Colorado's Amendment 2 or the military's policy on gays specifically named bisexuals as targets of discrimination, not a single hand went up. After the workshop, 80 people knew. The activists among them will take that information and do something with it. As we educate them, more and more will.

Michael and Tigger debunked the myth of non-monogamy by talking about their monogamous relationships. Michael talked about wanting to have a family with a female partner. Tigger shook up people's stereotypes by discussing her long-term relationship with a bisexual man. Their mothers explained their process of accepting and understanding Tigger's and Michael's sexual orientation. Rose explained she had to learn to accept Michael's sexuality however he defined it, and that any problems she had were not with Michael, she knew they were her own. She commented that "we're so caught up in putting a name, a label to everything: gay, lesbian, bisexual, but what they (our children) are, are loving individuals. I think we are making this more complicated than it is." After his workshop, Michael Szymanski felt that in general "people had tremendous difficulty giving up the notion that sexual orientation is fixed or that people fit neatly into categories. They couldn't comprehend fluidity."

Dannielle Raymond was one of four panelists who had a gay, lesbian or, in her case, a bisexual parent.. It was very moving to hear the pride and wisdom put forth by

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these young people. Two of the panelists – 9 and 11 year old girls – have organized a support group and put out a newsletter called “Gaybies.” Six members meet regularly. Stefan Lynch who founded the national group COLAGE for children with gay, lesbian and bisexual parents explained that his dad came out as gay when he was one year old. His mom came out as a lesbian three years later. As he grew up, he lived six months with each of his parents in politically active communal households. Stefan is now 23 and identifies as a radically straight queer identified man. He said in some ways his life would be easier if he was gay because the queer community is his home. Dannielle spoke to the difficulty of coming out to friends about her mother as she was growing up. She chose her friends wisely, always testing for homophobic attitudes. Dannielle got to the point where she didn't care what people thought. She closed her presentation by saying, “I learned to trust myself and my feelings by witnessing my mother's radically honest approach to life.” What was obvious to those of us in the audience was bisexual was only mentioned when Dannielle brought it up.

The planning of the San Francisco conference took a year and a half. The local PFLAG Bay Area organizing committee did not contact the bisexual community to assist in the planning. On the other hand, we were not aware of this conference until seven months before so hadn't contacted them. When I did find out I was told at that point the workshops were already in place. Bisexuals had the one workshop because local PFLAG parent activist Laura Segal insisted there be at least one bisexual and one transgender workshop. She told me she was shocked and dismayed that she had to deal with biphobic comments and snickering throughout the committee planning process whenever the subject came up. Clearly there is work to be done.

My personal feeling is that most parents are ready for more visible inclusion of bisexual people, bisexual parents and children, but organizational changes are slow and won't move any faster because that is the way institutions move – slowly. Granted, the addition of bisexual to the mission statement in 1992 was a giant step, but only one, and only the first of many steps that need to be taken. Last year, Deb Kolodny, one of six national BiNET USA coordinators, and A. Billy S. Jones facilitated a successful training with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. As one of the coordinators for BiNET USA I am happy to report a letter is being drafted to contact PFLAG leadership and Board members about the possibility of working together on a bisexual in-service sensitivity/educational training.

Now is the perfect time to get in touch with your local and regional PFLAG chapters. Make yourself known and available, do presentations at meetings, breakdown stereotypes by becoming visible, bring resources, volunteer. We need an organization like PFLAG to support us in the best way possible. That support (as we bisexuals know all too well) goes both ways!

Our visibility at the conference was a beginning, and a pretty successful one at that. It behooves us to get involved. Participation is essential as a long-term strategy for the next several years. Bisexuals and our parents, families and friends, as well as our groups and organizations, must join in the work of organizing conferences, presenting workshops, pushing for a keynote speaker or a plenary panel on bisexuality (and transgender) issues, peopling an information table, taking an ad out in the official program, or just attending the conference and be an out visible bisexual presence.

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