

LCP workshops hit homophobia

by Dot & Lauren

Suzanne Pharr, head of the National Lesbian Task Force & Caucus of the Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, facilitated two workshops on "Internalized Homophobia" sponsored by the Lesbian Community Project in May. Suzanne has presented homophobia workshops to various audiences across the country and is an active participant in the women's movement and the lesbian movement.

Suzanne designed the series of workshops to be about "setting ourselves free, about loving ourselves and each other, about personal growth and political organizing." The major block to these freedoms, and hence the need for the workshops, is homophobia — both external and internal. According to Suzanne, "It makes us choose invisibility — closeting — which then makes us unable to know all of us, our numbers; unable to work together in our own behalf for our own

rights; and unable to get the support of non-lesbians because they don't know we are lesbians. Homophobia can lead to our hurting ourselves and hurting others." The need to confront homophobia is great and must be done in order to survive personally and collectively: We must break free of the restraints and damage of homophobia. We must free ourselves to organize for survival."

To start us thinking on the effects of homophobia, Suzanne began the two sessions by asking us to imagine a world free of homophobia. What would be different? and why? The answers ranged from unlimited freedom in dress (no more "dress for success") to complete openness in choice of lifestyles (without fear of loss or pain) to further acceptance and support of art and artists (creativity in general). Each point was questioned and explained and debated. Suzanne took the visions one step further when she asked us to imagine a world without gender roles. The primary answer was that there would be no homophobia; therefore, "to work against homophobia is to work against violence against all women" and to work for an end to our oppression.

The major difficulty in eliminating homophobia is that most of us are victims of internalized homophobia. The majority agreed that the dividing line between the external and the internal is often blurred and not easily separated. There are some justified fears

about the uses of homophobia against us, such as loss of families, jobs, homes, children and even lives. Suzanne believes that "the separating line comes when we individually and collectively come to believe that others are justified in their prejudices, when we believe there is something wrong with us, when we feel we do not deserve equality and freedom, when we take in the world's view and suffer from low self-esteem and self-hatred."

Some barriers to dealing with our own homophobia are the manifestations of internalized homophobia. These can include drug and food and alcohol addiction, depression, destructive relationships, self-blame, closeting and passing. Difficult as it may sometimes seem, we *must* confront and eliminate our own homophobia in order to be free and to work for our rights.

"What we must remember," Suzanne emphasized, "is that despite living in a homophobic world, we gay and lesbian people keep on being, keep on going. We are all miracles of survival and should be proud of it. . . . Many of us suffer from (internalized homophobia) in some degree. Those who have the least are those who have worked hard to remove it from their lives. To remove it, one must first develop a consciousness of it."

We have work to do — but we have survived this far. Most of us left these sessions with our thoughts already working on strategies to meet our goals.

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