

On being young and lesbian

by Cathy Siemens and Sue Smith

*This article was developed from a series of interviews with lesbian youth, their mothers and social service providers. The names have been changed to protect anonymity.

You probably haven't met Carmen. She's 14 and lives with her grandfather. The kids at school know she's a lesbian. The guys want to make her one of the gang. The girls won't talk to her. Carmen's proud to be a lesbian, glad she came out early, but she's lonely. If only she had someone understanding to talk to...

Maybe you've met Bets. She's 18 and lives with Sara, her lover. Last year her mother kicked her out of the house. She had discovered a letter Bets wrote when coming out to a friend. Bets survived on the street. These days things are looking better for her. She's kicked her drug habit and is going back to school. She could use some support.

Their stories, like their lives, are varied and compelling. Many young lesbians knew they were gay as young as age 8 or 9. Some were tomboys. One woman, Alice, was a cheerleader and beauty queen. Stereotypes don't seem to apply. But common themes run through their stories: the need for a balance between integrity and social acceptance, the need to find friends and lovers, and the strug-



ILLUSTRATION: E. ANN HINDS

gle to develop their lesbian identity.

Like all teenagers, they face the problems of separating from their families, creating their own individuality, and preparing for the future. Being lesbians complicates the tasks of teenage years. They face special kinds of isolation and rejection, harassment, and lack of support. At age 20, Alice seems to have been through it all.

Although superficially popular, Alice always felt different. She refused to date the captain of the football team. Not until she went to an all-girls' college did Alice begin to feel comfortable. She met Barbara. They became friends, then lovers. For the first time, Alice felt she could relate to someone on a less superficial level.

After a stormy breakup with Barbara, Alice turned to her parents for support. Instead of understanding, Alice's mother wanted to check her blood for hormonal imbalance. Alice started therapy. Both her therapist and parents viewed her lesbianism as the cause of her troubles.

Like Alice, another young lesbian had trouble with her family. In seventh grade, Sally felt she had to tell someone. She chose her sister. This sister blabbed to the family that Sally was a lesbian. Sally's mother, convinced that homosexuals were possessed by the devil, condemned Sally to hell and forced Sally to confession. Sally still feels frightened and guilty.

In contrast, Mary's coming-out has been less traumatic. Almost ten years ago, Mary witnessed another coming-out: her mother's. At the time she thought it would be "neat" to become a lesbian. Her mother has been supportive all along.

In the ninth grade, Mary realized she, too, was attracted to women. She wasn't sure it was "neat." Even though her mother was supportive, Mary held off a year before contacting Windfire. After a year in the group, she now counts Windfire members among her closest friends outside of school. In school, she's working up the courage to tell her best friends during senior year.

To come out at school is to risk rejection and harassment from peers. Few lesbians are out at school. The "trendy" girls call them "cute." Others call them "bull-dykes." "Hey, dykey, grow your hair. Wear a dress!" is a familiar taunt. Teachers often fail to notice this harassment and even exhibit their own

homophobia. Carmen's female teachers made her a dress for graduation. She didn't wear it; instead, Carmen prominently displayed an "I-Love-Women" button on the lapel of the jacket she usually wore.

These young women have learned that being a lesbian means being more honest with themselves. Because their lives challenge social norms and conventions, they often have to invent their own rules. They've had to grow up a little faster and become independent, because they couldn't rely on family and friends for support.

In contrast to the hardship of making friends at school, making friends at Windfire is easy. Facilitated by an adult lesbian and a gay man, Windfire is a peer support group for underage lesbians and gay men. "Windfire helped me gain confidence about myself," Mary said. Another young woman added, "Before I went to Windfire, I thought I was the only teenage lesbian in the world." The size of the group fluctuates from 5 to 20 people. A contact person for Windfire says that she gets a call a day during the school year from young people seeking information. The group is a well-utilized resource for those seeking companionship and support. Not everyone there is in school; some hold jobs. Some do both.

Young lesbians feel a bond with gay men, especially those in Windfire, and they are concerned about the separation they see between older lesbians and gay men. But because young lesbians sometimes want to discuss their own particular concerns, they are interested in forming their own all-lesbian youth group in addition to Windfire.

Both Windfire and the newly-formed all-lesbian group need lesbian facilitators. They suggest that she be energetic, funny, and committed. With her help, they'd like to become involved in the wider Lesbian Community and organize youth dances and camping trips.

Besides Windfire, young lesbians sometimes hang out in bars. Occasionally, they go to the City, a nightclub for the underage crowd. However, the City is not appealing to everyone because of its clientele's reputedly heavy use of drugs. Rarely do these young lesbians manage to get into the Primary Domain or Club 927. Most of their socializing revolves around the network of people they meet through Windfire rather than those they run into in bars. Like "typical" teenagers, they

go to the movies and visit at friends' houses. But the places they go to eat are usually gay establishments. When they go for a hamburger, they're likely to be found at Roxy Hearts or Hamburger Mary's.

As young lesbians venture into the Lesbian Community, they often start at the Lesbian Forum or A Woman's Place Bookstore. When one woman went to the Forum, she commented, "It's incredible to be in a room full of just lesbians!" Although they felt it difficult to meet people at the Forum, they enjoyed the amount of information they learned from the programs offered.

One 20-year-old named Lisa volunteered at A Woman's Place Bookstore. At first she was scared about volunteering, but because everyone was so helpful and friendly, she felt she learned a lot about the Lesbian Community. She'd really encourage other young lesbians to volunteer. The Bookstore also enjoyed Lisa. In exchange for volunteering, the Bookstore offers to teach job skills like running a cash register, keeping inventory, and light bookkeeping. They will also provide job references.

Besides a place for volunteering, the Bookstore provides information about lesbian culture and Community resources. While there, young lesbians often read *Just Out* and *Rag Times*. Lisa suggested that a regular lesbian youth column would be another way to involve them because it's not only the young lesbians who need to learn about Lesbian Community; it's also the Lesbian Community who needs to learn about its younger members.

Young lesbians don't often participate in other Lesbian Community activities. Serving alcohol excludes them; likewise, a steep admission charge. Event organizers could perhaps offer a youth discount. Since many young lesbians don't drive, events need to be accessible by public transportation.

Those who read the books available at A Woman's Place and find ways to become involved in the Lesbian Community are introduced to the ideas of feminism. "It's scary to open your mouth for what you believe," one woman commented, "being a feminist takes guts and energy." Feminist-consciousness seems more ingrained in them than acquired. It has obviously affected their visions of the future. Each emphasized working in a career which would challenge her, give her financial security, and allow her independence. They expect continuing education to be part of their career plans. For example, by age 35, Alice wants a \$40,000-a-year job, a townhouse, two cars, and a part-time monogamous lover. She also had larger concerns: "I'm very civic-minded. I'd like to run for public office." She worries that being a lesbian would be held against her, and she knows that isn't fair. Just being a lesbian, she reasons, doesn't mean that people should be able to tell her what she can and cannot do. Another lesbian, 16, wants a house, a kid, a "wife," a motorcycle, and a good job at a mill. Few others envisioned having a child, but when they did, they wanted baby girls.

Many of them considered a long-term monogamous relationship both difficult and potentially limiting, but a few still wanted one. Others wanted stable but not suffocating relationships. They made a distinction between casual sex and multiple relationships (the "lesbian shuffle") although some saw this period in their lives as the time to "sow some wild oats."

In their relationships many young lesbians have abandoned traditional butch/femme role-playing. They like to consider themselves androgynous, expressing a variety of images and styles. They find it difficult to understand the emphasis placed on butch/femme roles with older lesbians. Like their older counterparts, however, they've experienced the fact that breaking up is never easy. Maintaining friendships after a break-up is very important. Their numbers being small, friendships are vital.

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