

Just out

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Out About Town is compiled as a courtesy to our readers. Performers, clubs, individuals or groups wishing to list events in the calendar should mail notices to *Just Out* by the 15th of the month preceding publication. Listings will not be taken over the telephone.

Display Advertising will be accepted up to the 17th of each month.

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Steppin' Out

In honor of Black History Month, we salute the lifelong work of the lesbian African-American rights activist and poet Pat Parker.

(Pat Parker died of cancer in the spring of 1989.)



PHOTO BY TEE CORINNE

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P A G E T W O

Turning gay

When you wonder why we need political rights or complain about donating to yet another cause, try remembering a time in your life when you thought you must be the only person in the world who felt the way you were feeling

BY J E R I D I L N O

"When did you turn gay?" Have you ever been asked this question? It was the most often asked question when I spoke at classes and other groups. A simple question that exposes a level of misunderstanding that most people have when it comes to the subject of our lives. I know of no one who got up one day, looked in the mirror and declared, "I think I'll become a lesbian today."

The general public seems to have the impression that we choose our sexuality as simply as we choose what we will wear to work. This assumption lies at the base of many arguments against our right to live and work in society. I have found that even many who are sympathetic to our issues believe that we somehow choose our sexual orientation. It is an important distinction: the difference between choosing our sexuality and choosing to accept our sexuality. After the process of coming out, the task of educating family and friends to this distinction is important to gaining their understanding of who we are.

When I was 16, a junior in high school, I had the normal experience of having crushes. In my case, the subjects of my passion were other young women in my class. Because I had no frame of reference for these feelings, I had no idea what they meant. But I knew that I should not talk about them in the same way my friends were discussing their feelings

about the young men.

In my English class we were seated alphabetically, placing me at the end of the row that was headed by the Aldrich Twins. Joanne and Karen were stunning in my eyes. They were popular. I was a shy wallflower. I worshipped them from afar, never daring to even talk to them.

One day, the English teacher was returning our test papers. As he called a name, the students would go up to his desk to pick up their paper. My name was called. I went to the front of the room, picked up my test, and turned to go back to my seat. Joanne Aldrich smiled at me! I blushed. I stammered. I stepped into the wastebasket and sprawled at the feet of both the Aldrich Twins.

I have watched this scene played many times in several variations in movies as an expression of puppy love, but the characters are always young men stammering in the presence of young women. It took me many years to understand that my experience in that English class was normal. I did not "turn gay" that afternoon. My sexuality was developing at the same pace as that of my co-students in class that day. The difference was the societal acceptance of their experiences.

That moment in my life happened over 32 years ago. I would like to think that it would be different today. I would like to believe that today a young person would know what those feelings meant, that there are resources for

them, places to talk freely about their crushes. If I need any motivation for working for equal rights, I recall that moment, which caused me great shame, and think how different my ten years could have been. Those years are difficult enough without the added confusion of feelings no one would talk about, much less acknowledge as being normal.

There is evidence that many unexplained suicides among young people can be traced to feelings of fear and confusion about their sexuality. Efforts like those of Dr. Virgine Uribe in the Los Angeles school system expose the fact that most teens who have gay or lesbian feelings are still struggling in a world that will not recognize their experiences. When you wonder why we need political rights or complain about donating to yet another cause or campaign, try remembering a time in your life when you thought you must be the only person in the world who felt the way you were feeling. With all the changes of the past 35 years, I know there are still young women and men out there who are as baffled as I was when the Aldrich Twins caused me to blush and stammer.

In the early '70s, one of the stated goals of an energetic gay and lesbian political movement was to provide positive role models for those young people who had only the most negative stereotypes as a backdrop for their experiences. Today, the crisis of AIDS has added another obstacle to the process of coming out successfully. Today, the goal of providing positive role models and a safe emotional environment is even more important. ▼

Jeri Dilno's column, "Turning Point," appears regularly in *Gay Lesbian Nation (GLN)* published in San Diego.