

IT'S A QUEER THING

The cool ones

By getting past mistrust and fear, one gay man finds he can bond with heterosexual men

by Howard N. Dana

Recently I volunteered to work with junior high school-aged people for a year, in a teaching capacity. At the first teacher training I met my co-teacher, John, a sensitive, nice-looking man in his late 20s with impeccable taste and a desire to help young people learn. He is smart, well-read, and up on the latest politics—I was instantly attracted to him. But I was worried at the same time. We were going to have to teach a class together every week for a year. We would have to plan the lessons, go on field trips, and do projects together. What if it didn't work? What if my attraction led us into a relationship too quickly? What if we broke up and couldn't stand to teach the class together? What if...?

The only question which didn't enter my head was, "What if he is straight?" By jumping to conclusions, I had already played out the drama of our romantic relationship in a hundred different ways in my mind. I was sure of my senses, which told me he was gay. Imagine my surprise when he came out to me, in our first meeting alone together, as a straight man with a girlfriend. Surprisingly, where there should have been disappointment, there was a sense of relief and a renewed interest.

Without that sexual tension, I would be free to interact with John in a more comfortable way. The integrity of the class would not be threatened, and I would gain a new straight male friend. When I moved from Bozeman, Mont., to Portland three years ago, I came looking for a queer community. Bozeman's isolation made Portland look like paradise, and I plunged into the queer scene with both feet. I was soon living a life in which my interactions with straight society were limited. I went exclusively to gay bars; my hairdresser and dentist were gay; all my friends were queer; and I knew gay men and lesbians all over town, by patronizing businesses where they worked. Caught up in the rising tide of gay and lesbian politics in Oregon, I found myself at queer rallies and protests. Even my job was as a queer rights/AIDS educator. I had no straight male friends and few straight female friends.

By going to an extreme, I usually find where my balance should be. I began to realize I had ghettoized myself and that I needed to be reconciled to my straight allies, especially men. I have always felt, as many other gay men have as well, that straight men are to be feared. They are the ones who call us names and physically threaten us. Men such as Lon Mabon and Scott Lively appear on television preaching hatred of gay men. Gay men are rarely overpowered by women, but most often are intimidated by straight men or repressed gay men living heterosexual lifestyles. So many people who oppress queer folk have questions and issues with their own sexual orientation.

From the oppression of gay men by heterosexual men and the subsequent oppression of other queer folk in turn, what filters through heterosexism, homophobia and internalized

homophobia is a cycle of mistrust and fear. It has been difficult for me to trust straight men or feel close to them until now. John is not the first straight man to have touched my life in the last year. I am beginning to meet more and more heterosexual men who are completely secure in their own heterosexuality and who can embrace queer men as friends and equals. I have given this category of people the title "cool straight men."

Cool straight men will greet you with a hug rather than blocking your affection with a hand-shake. They want to hear about your boyfriends and they are respectful toward them when introduced. Rather than hiding in an uncomfortable cloak of political correctness, cool straight men will ask you any questions they are wondering about and will expect the same of you. For me, the exploration of this new male phenomenon is very much a two-way street. Even though I was raised to be heterosexual by straight parents, I realize that I have had very few open, honest relationships with heterosexual men during my adult life. I have allowed fear and mistrust to let me write off all straight men as "oppressors." This is certainly not the case.

There is a postcard around that reads, "Because I am male doesn't mean I'm sexist. Because I am white doesn't mean I'm racist. And because I am heterosexual doesn't mean I'm homophobic." While this may not be entirely true, I think there is an important kernel of wisdom in it. If we are truly about the work of liberation and equality, we must work through our own homosexist issues and begin to look at our allies in a new light. We ask for others to understand us and be sympathetic to our situation. Wanting to live our lives in peace and equality, we are ultimately working for full inclusion as celebrated members of the world community. But we cannot start this process by closing the door to straight men.

The most unifying force in the world is getting to know someone who is different from you. By putting genuine effort into the relationships you have with people of other races, genders, or sexual orientations, you will gain an understanding unlike any you have ever known. For me this means, among other things, fostering new relationships with heterosexual men—not just any heterosexual men, but the cool ones. I will not be so naive as to suggest that all straight men will accept me and want to be my friend. Straight men can still pose a threat to me. But there are also those who greet me with tolerance, acceptance or celebration. By getting past my mistrust to see that there are heterosexual men who enrich my life and for whom I am an equal and cherished friend, I am not so leery of the rest.

John and I teach our junior high class amazingly well together. The kids are cool with both of us, and our different perspectives enhance their learning. Had it not been for this volunteer work, John's path might not have crossed mine. But because it has, I have another straight male friend and another opportunity to build bridges between cultures.



BUILDING DIVERSITY

Declare your group, business, classroom, organization or family an "oppression free zone."

Establish rules of conduct and language that bar innuendoes, jokes, statements and cartoons that are demeaning to people of color and gays and lesbians of every color.

Talk to your friends and get them to actively work against racism, sexism and homophobia.

Speak your mind when you hear offensive jokes, songs, name-calling, and any demeaning statement about people of color, and gays and lesbians of every color.

Boycott establishments that tolerate racism, sexism and homophobia.

Talk to people where you hang out about racism, sexism and homophobia.

Join us. Be part of the solution.

just out

From *Establish the Climate*, a booklet by Southeast Uplift.