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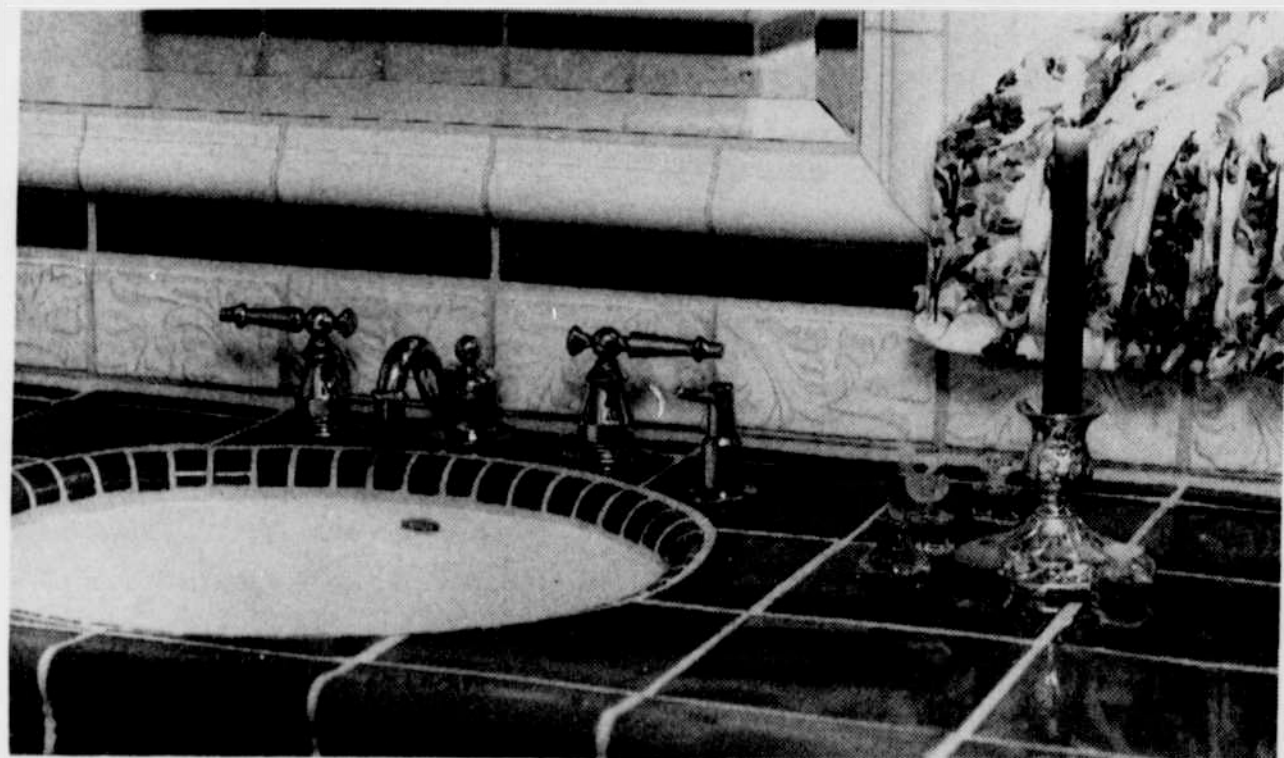


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OUT THERE

Out on-line

A stay-at-home activist finds that answering personal questions can lead to understanding

by Nightshade

"Can I ask you a personal question? Just out of curiosity?"

I am on-line on my favorite chat bulletin board. It is 1 am and I have been making small talk with a 35-year-old straight male. I know very little about him, other than what he has chosen to write in his bio, and he knows very little about me. But he does know that I am female, 31, and gay. It says so, right up there on the "Who's On" menu. It was up to me to state my sexual preference. Calling yourself straight is an easy choice in this world, and in the realm of bulletin board systems, bisexual women are very popular. But I stated the truth about myself, and that is that I am gay. And by doing so, I have knowingly placed myself in the minority again. While the clientele of BBSs is

live in a world with such people, and they immediately—no matter who they are, or what they are all about—they immediately earn my respect and my willingness to answer even the most personal questions if I feel it will help them understand. At times it is easy to educate someone. But at other times it is extremely difficult and taxing. I have to explain the basics over and over to break through the stereotypes so that they can begin to hear me. But even though it is frustrating sometimes, it is very worth it to me. And I find myself in awe of several things.

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The anonymity of the medium allows people to ask questions of total strangers that they would be too embarrassed to ask their closest friends face to face.

Even self-avowed straight people will admit to homosexual feelings or experiences as a way of creating trust and openness in the conversation.

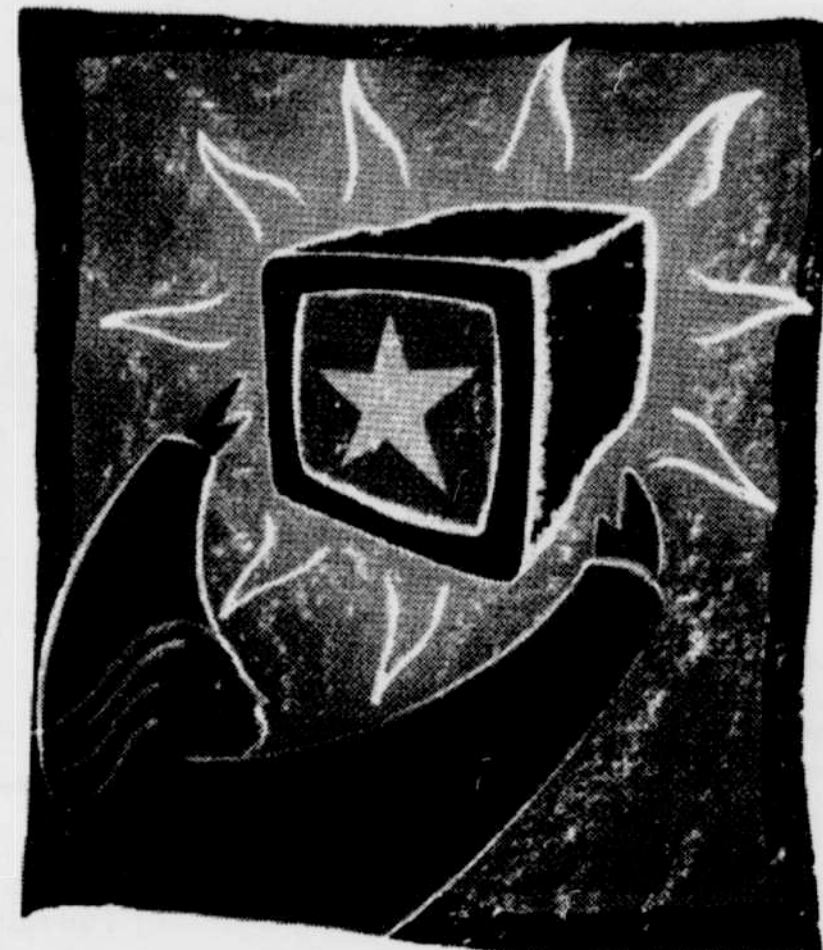


ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN RITTER

ever-changing, one fact remains clear. There are very few lesbians or gay men on mainstream chat boards.

There are three BBSs devoted to us queers in Portland, that I know of, and it seems that most of us stay to ourselves in that respect. But I don't know, maybe I am a masochist at heart, or maybe I am honoring diversity by going with the mainstream BBS I have chosen. The fact of the matter is I enjoy talking to a wide variety of people, and the BBS that I am on is busy, busy, busy. And that means I am never left without someone to talk to. Even at 2 am, and that is often the time of day when I get questions like "Can I ask you a personal question?"

My response to that sort of inquiry usually goes something like this: "Oh no...here we go again." This I say to myself or whomever else happens to be in the same room with me. To the person I am talking to on-line I say, "Sure, go ahead." The reason for my first, private, response is that as often as not, the person will then proceed to grill me about my sex life and what size tits I prefer, or they will ask me if I will do it with my girlfriend—or do their wife—while they watch, or, since I am a dyke, I must want to dominate someone and they would like to be my slave.

But sometimes I am surprised. Sometimes I get someone who is seeking to be educated. Someone who wants to give me respect. Someone who feels they are ignorant on a subject, and think that I might be able to help them alleviate that ignorance. Then I am in heaven. I am inspired. I am happy to

creating trust and openness in the conversation. I believe I am giving them a safe place to recognize the empathy that might never have had the chance to surface otherwise. I have been able to help a few people come out to themselves and begin the process of living their lives in honesty. And I have made friends with people that I would never have found a common bond with in daily life.

And yes, friends is the right word. They know I am gay and have come to respect it. We always talk to each other again after a night of personal questions and sharing. And they make a point of telling me when they meet other gay people, as if to say, "Hey, look at me, I didn't judge these people on sight, and now they are my friends too!"

My most recent triumph—albeit a small one—was making friends with a straight male minister who was pro-Ballot Measure 13. He was giving a straight female a hard time for talking to me, and I wound up talking to him for about an hour the next day about myself, being gay, religion, and friendship. I don't think I changed his mind or anything, but he now knows and likes a genuine gay person. He still says "hi" to me when he sees me on-line, and we have a date to meet on-line soon and discuss Measure 13. I consider this a step in the right direction. The direction of equality and tolerance.

I am proud and pleased with the work I have done. Just as any activist would be, with a recent success or a job well done. And I look forward to the next time I am on-line and someone says to me, "Can I ask you a personal question? Just out of curiosity?"