

PROFILE

A battle of identity

Lesbian activist Cathleen Finn talks about the fight for the right to be openly Irish American

by D. Killian

Historically, the Irish in this country have been a close-knit community. In the last few years, however, this family has been fiercely divided—battling it out, in the media and the courts, over whether lesbians and gay men can march in the annual St. Patrick's Day parades in Boston and New York. Clear to many observers is the fact that what's at stake here is not just politics, legality or tradition. The real issue is identity: What does it mean to be Irish American? And how does this identity restrict the visibility of women and lesbians and gay men?

Cathleen Finn—a first-generation Irish American and out and outspoken member of Boston Gay, Lesbian, Irish Bisexuals—has marched with every “gay” St. Pat's parade in Boston and has been on the inside of negotiations and court proceedings with the group of veterans who sponsor the city's annual parade and oppose GLIB's involvement. Last year organizers canceled the parade (after a court ruled that GLIB could march); this year they have been successful in barring GLIB's participation. This month the case goes before the U.S. Supreme Court.

We've been put on trial for what it means to be Irish. I think for them [the parade organizers] being heterosexual is somehow so wrapped up with being Irish that they can't imagine someone being Irish and not being heterosexual. I don't think it's as important how many relatives you have in Ireland or how much Guinness beer you've drunk in your life but rather who you are and what you value and your responsibility to the Irish community. I think these men who have organized the parade have really disgraced the Irish community and they're really the ones who will go down in history as being all the things not Irish: being bigoted, being closed-minded, turning their backs on their Irish brothers and sisters.

I grew up in an Irish home. Both of my parents are from Ireland; they came to the United States and met in Chicago in the 1950s and got married. All my immediate relatives live in Ireland—most of my aunts, uncles and cousins. So I strongly identify with my Irish culture. Although [in GLIB] we have different connections to our Irishness—some of us are from Ireland, some of us are first- or second-generation—we are all Irish. When you're talking about something as broad as ethnicity, there's diversity. And the parade organizers are really in denial about that. They're saying that it's First Amendment speech and that they have a right to decide who can participate in it [the parade], that it's a private event, and that it's their own values that they want to promote and not our values. But it's really just a smoke screen for their bigotry.

The first reason that they gave us was that they had insufficient information about our social group, and this is even though they held a meeting with members of GLIB and had people's phone numbers. If they had insufficient information, there were many ways they could have gotten more.

And then they said it was a public safety

concern to have us participate in the parade. The Boston police came out and were furious and said, it's our job to make sure people have public safety and if this group marches we will provide it. Another reason they gave was that the people in the group were political extremists, a cover-up for Queer Nation or ACT UP. They wanted to delve into all these things, but we have people in the group who represent the widest spectrum of political viewpoints. We have people in the group who are Republicans; we have people in the group who are Catholics; we have people in the group who are in their 60s.

In 1991 I went to the parade as a spectator, just for St. Patrick's Day. And then in 1992 I marched with GLIB, and it was just amazing to me how much opposition there was to our participating in the parade.

Basically all we did was march down the street and wave. You know, some of us were saying, “Hey, happy St. Patrick's Day!” and things in the spirit of the day. And people would just glare at us. They wouldn't know how to react. They saw me, saw that I looked Irish. You know, I have red hair, blue eyes, freckles—when I'm in Ireland, people stop and ask me for directions! They saw that they have the same connection that I have with them, that we share a common heritage. And yet, they didn't want to be positive. They didn't want to like me.

Kids would be waving, just like they wave at every other group that would go by, and the parents would pick the kids up, stop them from waving, and turn their faces away so they couldn't look at us. And there were a lot of really ugly signs: “God said kill the fags.” “Go home queers.” Things like that. And here are people who claim

to be church people and they're standing in front of a church with “God says kill the fags.” Just forming a sentence with “God hates”—you can't find a place where that could possibly reference.

I was [marching] in the third row, on the end near the sidewalk. It was just amazing to see people, Irish people, from all different age groups, flipping us the bird, screaming at the top of their lungs homophobic garbage they've heard all their lives—“Fucking fags!” “Why don't you get out of here?” “Go home!” “Perverts!” And then throwing stuff like you wouldn't believe. That year it was smoke bombs, silly string, empty beer bottles—glass beer bottles. Men would break out from the crowd and try to assault the people who were marching. A friend of mine, Ruth, who was marching in front of me, got hit in the head with a rock.

I don't think there is a way of preparing yourself emotionally for what we went through. The next day when I was waiting for a bus, I saw this guy, an older man, and he looked Irish to me. My natural response was a feeling of some sort of affinity. I felt that for a fleeting second. Then my next feeling was fear. I never have felt that before in my life. All my life, I had always felt that if someone else was Irish and I was in some kind of a pinch, that they would help me out, that they would stand up for me as a community-type thing. And that was taken away by the experiences of the day before. I really felt that as a loss. I really felt if there's anything close to post-traumatic stress disorder, that was it—that sense of automatic kinship replaced with fear.

And so, for me, it becomes a really cynical question: What do you have to do to prove to these people that you're part of the community?

The answer is, as long as you're fighting people who are ignorant, there's no way of proving it. There's no way of proving your value to the community.

I have received death threats. Maybe it's my Irish fatalism, but I'm willing to die for this cause. A lot of people—we're talking people in their 20s and 30s—when they were going into the parade in '92, they wrote out their wills.

We really had a sense that something could really go wrong because no one in the community—no church or political leaders—took a moral stand on this issue, even from a human rights perspective. There were very few voices saying that these people should be left alone, that they should be allowed to march and be treated with the same dignity and respect that you [would want]. There was a conspiracy of silence.

And there was also an attempt to really shame us. There were a lot of people filming and taking pictures of us along the parade route. When accusations were made that we had shouted something obscene or that someone had made an obscene gesture, I challenged the parade organizers openly. I said, “You know, you had so many people along the parade route videotaping us, taking pictures, recording us in every way, I challenge you to find one frame of one photograph that

shows anyone in GLIB engaging in anything other than completely polite and civil behavior.” And they couldn't produce anything. If you looked along the sidelines, people were making all kinds of obscene gestures, screaming all kinds of swear words—even in front of their children, in many cases. And yet we were considered the people who were being obscene, just by openly identifying the fact that we're not heterosexual.

It's such a fundamental thing, your sexual orientation. And so being different about that is really scary to some people, and yet the fact that it is so fundamental is the reason we want to be open about it. The veterans' contention is they're not against all gays, just these particular queers who openly identify. But there was a guy in the [Irish] community on the “in crowd” of those whole circles, who, as it turns out, was gay, and he was killed having anonymous sex. The same forces that kept that guy in the closet are the same forces that want to keep us out of the parade.

Some people look at us and say, “Why do you go somewhere where you're not welcome? Why do you have to march in this parade?” And really, the only paradigm that I can think of, at least in U.S. culture, is the civil rights movement. You know, what did African Americans have to do in order to secure their civil rights? They had to be visible. They had to go places where they were not wanted. And once they won—and this was the argument for 1994, we had won in court and yet people expected us to capitulate and say, OK, we won't march this year—once you win your place at the lunch counter, you eat there. You don't walk away. It's just such a basic issue. Why do you go where you're not wanted? Because I don't kid myself. If I can't walk down the street with my Irish community, then how can I expect to get a fair shake at my job or when I try to buy a home or in any other things in life?



Cathleen Finn (center) at the head of the 1993 gay, lesbian and bisexual St. Patrick's Day Parade