

THE GREAT DIVIDE

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In a 1970 issue of the national gay and lesbian newsmagazine *The Advocate*, lesbian activist Del Martin writes of her frustration with the then predominantly gay (male) movement: "Good-bye, my alienated brothers.... Good-bye to gay bars that discriminate against women.... Good-bye to the Halloween Balls, the drag shows and parties. The humor has gone out of the game. The exaggeration of the switching (or swishing) of sex roles has become the norm in the public eye.... Good-bye to the 'Police Beat'—the defense of washroom sex...that was never my bag anyway.... 'Gay is good,' but not good enough—so long as it is limited to white males only. Lesbians joined with you in what we mistakenly thought was a common cause. A few of you tried, we admit. But you were still too few.... I had hoped you were my brothers and would grow up to recognize that freedom is not self-contained. You cannot be free until you free me—and all women—until you become aware that in all the roles and games you play, you are always It."

Twenty-five years later, in an April 1995 issue of *The Advocate*, a gay man writes: "I know you probably couldn't care less, but with this last issue I received, you have lost a subscriber. I am a gay male with absolutely no interest in lesbian issues. Who the fuck cares about Janis Ian's tits?" That letter, signed by California resident Harry Rollins, was in response to an opinion piece written by *Advocate* columnist Janis Ian, who was describing her experience getting a mammogram.

"I don't think these are isolated incidents. I see a lot of sexism within the gay male community. Some of that has to do with the fact that men have an unfamiliarity with women. I think the same can be said of straight men, but in the gay community, many men have created social circles solely around their own gender," says Graham Harriman, M.A., a private practice therapist who counsels many gay men.

"Certainly I know people on both sides of the spectrum: Those who say, 'Hey, it's great to see so many lesbians at the bar tonight,' to those who say, 'Oh God, there are lesbians here tonight.' Though that's not a highly unusual attitude, it still surprises me when I hear that, and it frustrates me, too," he says.

Tom L. Knight, M.S.W., who also counsels gay men, adds: "It's still basically a man's world, and men's unfamiliarity with women often makes them uncomfortable, which in turn can lead to divisiveness."

Some may scoff at the notion that it's a "man's world," at least within Oregon's present-day gay and lesbian community. In recent years, lesbians have led the statewide campaigns to defeat anti-sexual minority ballot initiatives; the board of Right To Privacy, the state's largest gay, lesbian and bisexual rights organization, is overwhelmingly female; the state's largest AIDS service organization, Cascade AIDS Project, is headed up by a woman (though not a lesbian) as is Phoenix Rising, a counseling center that caters to sexual minorities; lesbians have the Lesbian Community Project, which boasts several hundred mostly female members, while no comparable organization exists for gay men; and, of course, *Just Out* has taken its share of hits from critics who feel the paper is "too lesbian."

But 15 years ago lesbians were virtually invisible in the Portland community. The Portland Town Council, from which evolved CAP and RTP, was founded primarily by men. As late as 1991, RTP's board comprised virtually all gay men. And most of the city's community-oriented restaurants, clubs and bars are owned by gay men; some of those venues cater exclusively to men.

"I think many lesbians are more than willing to support gay men's businesses, but it seems like it's a problem in some places when a lot of lesbians go or we just try to be ourselves," says LCP Executive Director LaVerne Lewis.

Lewis, once a co-proprietor of a club called



Starky's: a southeast Stark Street hangout

Cafe Mocha, says she was forced to close the establishment in part because gay men didn't support it.

"So much of this comes down to class and economics," she says. "Maybe that's why women share entrees. Maybe that's why lesbians go to bars owned by gay men—because we don't really have any places of our own."

One event at which you'll now find gay men and lesbians mingling in large numbers is the city's annual Gay and Lesbian Pride celebration. Up until 1982, however, Portland Gay Pride was exactly that—gay pride.

"In 1981, a group of gay men and lesbians came together to address concerns that Gay Pride spoke to only half the community, if even that," explains 45-year-old Larry Whitson, who was part of that group, known as TKO—short for technical knock-out (symbolizing the battle between lesbians and gay men, TKO's logo was a pair of boxing gloves).

"Our goal was to build a bridge between the genders. Lesbians and gay men came together to really talk about stereotypes each group had about

He says, "At first the changes were highly criticized by some parts of the community, but I believe the heritage lives on today from the work we did then. Despite some setbacks, many people in our community are really trying to understand and address the many needs of our diverse community."

According to Whitson, TKO's work came to a halt just as the AIDS crisis was beginning to emerge. "The other work we were doing in terms of creating a gay and lesbian dialogue really got side-tracked because of the health epidemic," he says.

Gemma Summers, Ph.D., a social psychologist and conflict resolution facilitator who has been involved in the sexual minority community for many years, adds: "Lesbians and gay men pulled together during the crisis, but in doing so other issues may have been pushed aside. The situations we're seeing now may indicate there are large tensions right under the surface—longtime tensions that were never adequately resolved."

There are other speculations about the pandemic's effects on lesbian-gay relations. "It's

"During the pre-Stonewall era, there was still a reason to bond together. It was gay vs. straight. Everything began to change after Stonewall."



The Crow, southeast Hawthorne Boulevard's new gay bar

the other. That type of dialogue really opened up our eyes."

The following year—stemming largely from TKO's work—Portland held its first Gay and Lesbian Pride celebration, which not only featured social activities, but a day-long conference addressing issues of gender, race and disabilities.

caused a tremendous change in the power structure. Twenty years ago lesbians just weren't visible," says 50-year-old Dick Levy, an openly gay member of Oregon's Democratic Central Committee. "That really began to change because of AIDS. Gay men who had previously been involved in organizations were either dying or taking care of

those who were dying, and lesbians began to replace them in those positions."

He adds: "I think there is anger about that. From a male perspective it's tough for men to give up the majority position. They feel shut out. My hope is we will become a stronger community because now both sides know what it feels like to be shut out—nobody wants to feel that."

Really feeling—or at least respecting—what another person may be experiencing will be the ultimate key to eradicating the "isms" that divide, says Diamond.

"Lesbians need to stop lumping all men together—you know, a man is a man is a man. It's not true. And gay men need to get more of a sense of their privilege in society, which may not always be easy because sense of privilege is so relative," she says. "Lesbians look at a gay man and see all the privileges associated with being male. Gay men often look toward the straight man and the privileges he has by virtue of being straight. We really have to remember it all comes down to point of view."

Portland therapist Shari Levine, whose clientele includes gay men and lesbians, adds: "Gay men may be more economically privileged than lesbians, but they're certainly not privileged emotionally. In fact, I think men are very oppressed emotionally. They're not really allowed to show and share their feelings, but women are. It's this emotional sharing that makes for such a rich existence."

There has also been widespread suggestion that men and women experience the world differently and thus communicate differently. That, say many, creates a major challenge for men and women when it comes to understanding the other's point of view. (Is it any wonder that John Gray's *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* and Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, have been hot sellers nationwide?)

Bob Weinreich, Ph.D., is a counselor with the Portland-based Men's Resource Center, which provides counseling services to men and women of varying orientations.

"Many of the straight men and women who come here are looking to find ways to better understand each other, and gender issues are a big concern," says Weinreich, who primarily works with the center's gay male clients. "This gender conflict is not limited to the gay and lesbian community, but rather to all men and women in our culture."

According to all sources contacted for this story, there do not seem to be any ongoing organized local efforts

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that specifically aim to improve communication and build bridges between gay men and lesbians. Most also agree that gay men and lesbians must first want to do that. "If that's indeed the case, and I think it is for some gay men and lesbians, then we

need to create an environment where that can be done," says Harriman. "We've done incredible things together when it comes to crisis situations. It would be great if we could sustain that bond rather than going our separate ways after every political campaign."

Still others say the conflict may actually be a sign of maturity. "Members of any movement that is young know they can't afford to show to the outside world that there is dissent within their ranks," says Diamond. "As a movement grows and becomes more confident, those dissensions that were previously suppressed can be expressed. Our movement is, indeed, maturing."