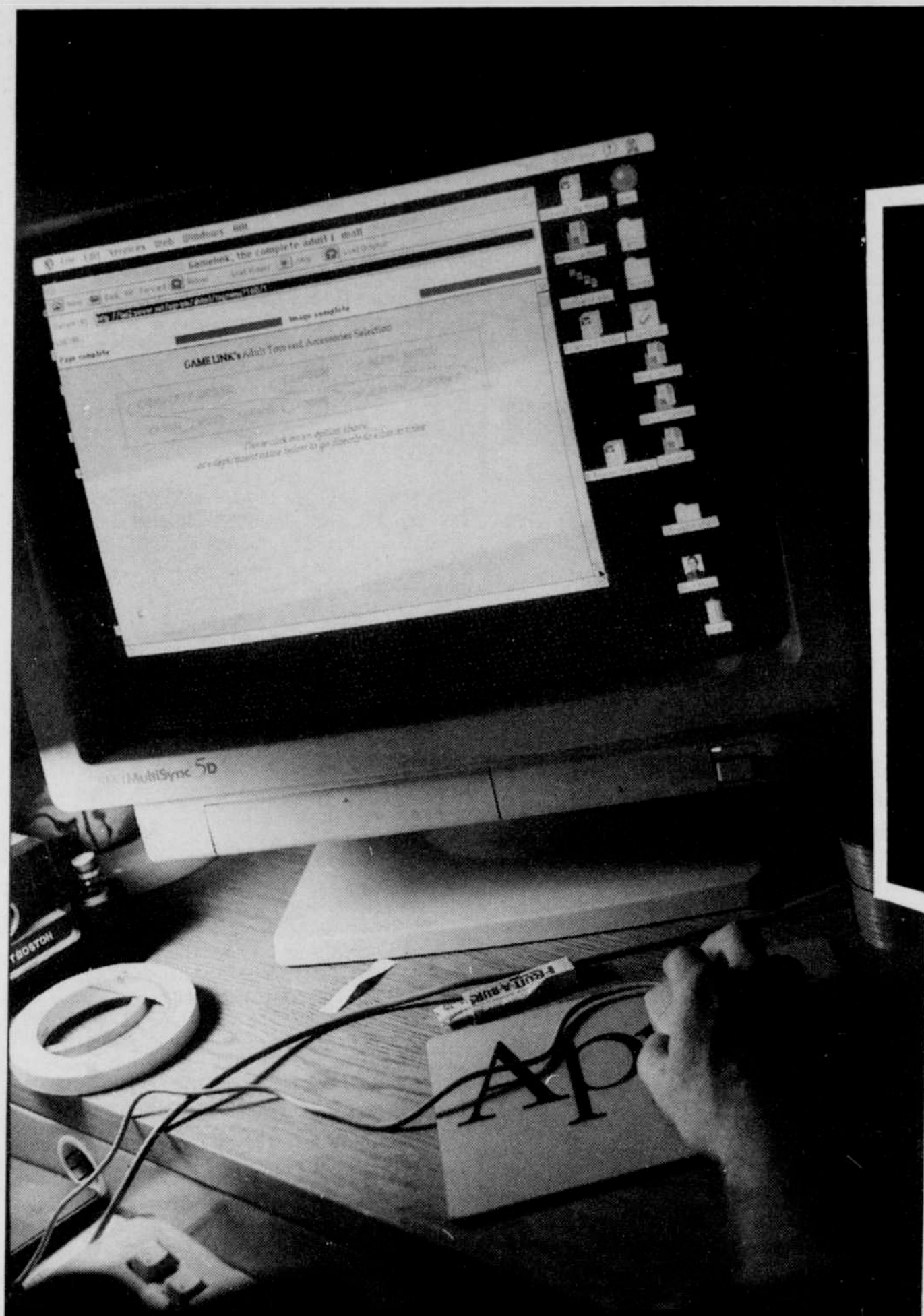




CYBER LIBERATION

It's a virtual community:
The Internet is linking
and transforming queers
worldwide

by Richard Shumate ▼ photos by Linda Kliever

Two years ago, Kenny Briansford felt completely alone in his secret.

After finishing an obligatory stint as a missionary for the Mormon Church, he had returned to the picturesque Utah mountain valley where he grew up. The time had arrived to begin the adult life scripted by his upbringing, in a sect which requires heterosexual marriage to get into the highest reaches of Heaven—and one which routinely excommunicates gay men and lesbians. By now, though, he knew the script didn't fit. He just didn't know how to go about rewriting it. Provo, an archconservative Mormon town in an archconservative Mormon state, is not an easy place to meet other gay men. There are no gay bars, no bookstores, no newspapers, no community centers. Even if there were, Kenny would have been too afraid to walk through the door. In the entire world, he knew just one other gay man, his best friend, who was also severely closeted.

But then Kenny, who handles the computer operations for his family's business, saw an ad in the back of a PC magazine, advertising a service where people—straight or gay—could download pictures of one another. About six months later, he discovered an interactive gay chat line, based in California.

It was the final piece of his puzzle. Kenny found himself talking to men who were comfortable being gay, in places far removed from his small town and its rigid traditions. Men in San Francisco, for God's sake. Within weeks, the closet was gone.

"There was someone on the end of that telephone line that was going through some of the same things I was going through," says

Briansford, 27. "I decided that what I had been told was ridiculous. There were other people like me."

Briansford's cyberspace epiphany is not an isolated event, says Dr. Becky Boone, an Atlanta psychologist who used to oversee the gay computer chat lines for America Online, the nation's largest on-line computer service.

"I've seen it hundreds of times. The utter joy of finding your fellows is exciting," says Boone. "For a long line of people, that has been the vehicle of empowerment."

We've all read the hype.

Cyberspace, cybersex, cyber this and cyber that—cyber ad nauseam. How the Information Superhighway and the Internet and the World Wide Web are the next great leap forward since sliced bread. While only the future will tell if reality lives up to hype and cliché, there is little question that for gay men and lesbians, connecting electronically holds the potential, at least, for revolutionary change.

Because with cyberspace, being part of the gay community no longer requires overt action that carries risk in a homophobic world. It no longer requires forsaking hometowns for the gay ghettos. A few taps of the keys in the privacy of your own home and you're in. Discretion assured.

There's no way to know for sure how many gay men and lesbians are connected through cyberspace. Because there are so many different

on-line services and access points to the Internet and the World Wide Web, estimates vary wildly on the number of users. One recent study by Nielsen Media Research estimated that 37 million people in North America have access to the Internet. Using the old "10 percent" chestnut, that would mean there are 3.7 million gay men and lesbians in North American cyberspace. By contrast, the largest gay organization in the United States, the Human Rights Campaign, has just 150,000 members, and no gay publication has even one-tenth as many readers.

The scuttlebutt among cyber types is that the gay and lesbian community forum on America Online, a service which has nearly 4 million members, receives more visitors than any other feature AOL offers. The company won't confirm that—it doesn't release information about its traffic—but spokeswoman Margaret Ryan

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does say the forum is "extremely popular."

In cyberspace, any gay or lesbian person with access to a computer and a modem can connect with other gay and lesbian people. The process is relatively easy. When an on-line service sent its software to Sherry Stinson in the mail, the first thing she did after installing the service was to punch in the key word "gay." She was instantly transported to gay and lesbian chat lines and bulletin boards and has been enamored ever since.

When asked what she would do without her computer service, Stinson, 32, a graphic artist who lives in a small town just outside of Tulsa, Oklahoma, tears back and laughs.

"I would be desperately sad. I would be des-

perately bored," she says. "It's kind of like the world is your playground."

In this brave new world, living next to a windswept wheat field in North Dakota—or an oil derrick in Oklahoma—is not an obstacle to connecting to the community. Worrying that someone might see you go into a gay bar or buy a gay magazine is not an obstacle. Being a teenager and having to worry what peers or parents might think is not an obstacle.

"There is a teen support group that meets every other week in my downtown area, but I've never gone," says Jamey, a 17-year-old lesbian in Fort Wayne, Ind. "I'm sure this is the same case of many in my situation—afraid of having family discover what one is trying to figure out by going to a gay support group. It would be hard enough just to think of an excuse to go, then to actually walk up the stairs of the building and enter the door? Too much."

Before going on line, Jamey was depressed and had intense thoughts of suicide. After getting in touch with other gay and lesbian teens, her sense of isolation decreased.

After her mother discovered she was a lesbian by finding Jamey in bed with another woman, she posted a frantic request for help and advice on line, and 15 people responded.

"These people did not even know who I was, but they took time out of their lives to help someone going through difficulties. If I didn't have this help, I don't know where I would be," she says.

Teenagers aren't the only people looking for support, for a sense of community, on line. Stinson, 32, who has been able to make few lesbian or gay friends in Tulsa, says she found the courage to leave a destructive relationship after striking up a friendship with a woman in Kentucky.

"Before going on line, I had absolutely no one to talk to about my situation. She really helped

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