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PROFILE

Windfall

Digging through dusty archives can give gay historian Allan Bérubé a headache, but he's feeling better now...

by Inga Sorensen

Hello, this is the MacArthur Foundation calling to inform you that you have been selected as a winner of a MacArthur Fellowship. Over the next five years you will receive an award totaling \$300,000 to spend any way you wish. It's our way of acknowledging your tremendous achievements."

Sound too good to be true? Well, those are the words Allan Bérubé heard during a recent out-of-the-blue call from the Chicago-based John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, which was doling out its latest round of so-called genius grants.

The prestigious program rewards creative people—viewed by MacArthur executives as hard-working experts who often push the boundaries of their fields—with unrestricted (and unsolicited) five-year grants.

Writers, dancers, scientists, human rights advocates and environmentalists are among those honored in the past. Bérubé is believed to be the first fellow recognized for work specifically in the field of gay and lesbian scholarship.

"I laughed and then I cried and then I laughed some more," says the still-flabbergasted Bérubé (pronounced bear-a-bee), 49, who lives in San Francisco and New York City. He received the MacArthur call in mid-June.

Bérubé, a self-described "community-based historian," is perhaps best known for his 1990 book entitled *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II*, which chronicles the personal experiences of gay and lesbian military personnel during World War II, a time when the military was adopting an anti-gay policy due largely to beliefs that gay men and lesbians were mentally ill.

Bérubé was also a guest instructor two summers ago at Portland State University, where he taught a course called "Queer Life and Social Change: 1900-1965."

Bérubé is currently working on a book tentatively entitled *Shipping Out*, which explores gay activism in the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union from the Depression era to the Cold War period.

He says he got the idea for the work, to be published by Houghton Mifflin, from subjects he interviewed for *Coming Out Under Fire*.

"A handful of the men belonged to this union," says Bérubé. "They were merchant seamen who worked on these huge ocean liners. Many of the men who were active in the union were gay, and they were truly a brotherhood. They protected each other in many ways—for instance, in the union [agreement], it was stated if a waiter was insulted, by a gay slur or whatever, he didn't have to serve that person."

Bérubé says he enjoys the subject matter of his latest work because it smashes the stereotype that gay men have historically been removed from the working classes.

"After *Coming Out Under Fire*, I remember thinking that I wanted to focus on working class and racial equality issues in relation to gay activism," he says. "I felt that way in part because I believed the gay community was not dealing with race and class at all."

In the late 1970s, Bérubé founded San Francisco's Lesbian/Gay History Project, and began conducting public slide-shows focusing on various aspects of gay and lesbian culture.

One of his first presentations was dubbed "Lesbian Masquerade: Women Who Passed as Men in Early San Francisco."

"It was a big hit. The place was packed," says Bérubé, who gathered much of his information from the California Historical Society.

"I used pictures of these women and shared their stories.... Many women in that era married other women. Today it may be more viewed as transgender history as opposed to just lesbian history," he says. "Nevertheless, people seemed very eager to connect with the past."

The show's popularity prompted Bérubé to take it on the road, and stops included hotshot cities like New York, Los Angeles and Philadelphia.

"I was hooked," he says.

With laptop poised, it is not unusual for Bérubé to inhabit a library from open to close.

"I can go an entire day in the archives with my laptop going through old union newspapers, come out at day's end with a huge headache, and take some Advil," he laughs. "But I love it."

He adds, "My partner had a rule—no talking about work after 9 o'clock...but he was so supportive—he built my bookshelves and talked about ideas—but that curfew was the rule."

Bérubé's partner, Brian Keith, died in 1987.

"I was in the middle of writing *Coming Out Under Fire*. It was a very difficult time," he says. "I was Brian's caretaker—and I had a deadline. I called up my editor and said, 'I need to take care of my partner now. I will not meet the deadline.' My editor was very understanding. Five months after Brian died, my editor called and said, 'I think it's time for you to start writing again.'"

The suggestion, says Bérubé, was born from compassion, and it was perhaps the best catalyst toward healing.

Bérubé will receive \$58,000 per year for the next five years. He intends to upgrade his computer and purchase quality video equipment so that he can videotape his subjects.

"I'll be able to work without worrying so much," he says.

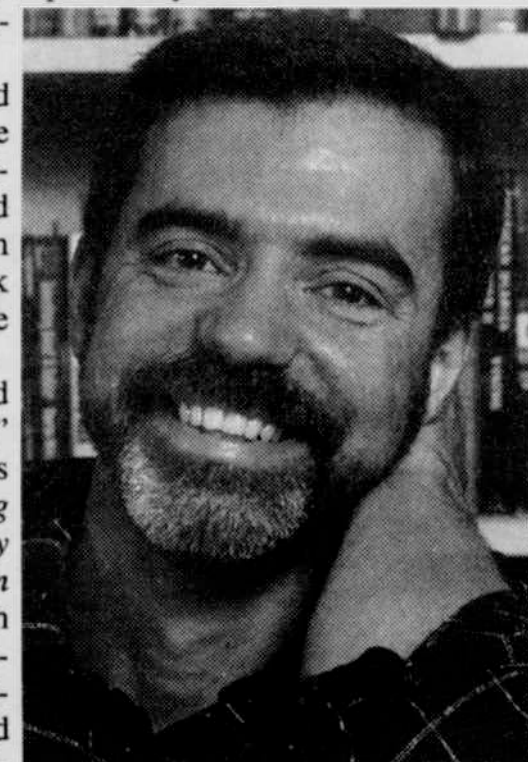
Bérubé, who grew up in Massachusetts and New Jersey, received a full scholarship to the University of Chicago but dropped out in 1968.

"It was a difficult period. We had the war. [Robert] Kennedy was assassinated. Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered. It was crazy. A lot of people dropped out that year," says Bérubé, who never returned because he found college was, ironically, dampening his desire to learn.

"No one in my family has graduated from college," Bérubé says.

As for his fellowship, he says: "I'm not affiliated with a university. I don't even have a bachelor's degree. It's getting harder and harder for an independent scholar to get by, so this is really incredible."

Bérubé, who drives a 1985 Toyota Tercel, adds, "I'm 49 now. I guess it's time to put something away for my retirement, too."



Allan Bérubé

PHOTO BY RICK GERTNER