

VIEW FROM HERE

Volunteering for our youth

Providing support and economic safety nets for young people can be done creatively—and it needs to be done

by Patricia Nell Warren

President Clinton thinks that more of us should volunteer to do good things. More time, energy, money and TLC is needed, he says. I agree. It's a nonpartisan message that should galvanize everyone in the country, no matter what their politics. Hillary Clinton will probably add that it takes a village to volunteer.

In the gay village, this message should give a little lift to people who are feeling burned out. Volunteers are the people who make things happen. Yet activist demands on our time and money are spiraling, as legislative attacks on the community increase. I could spend my whole day faxing letters to legislators in support or protest of this or that bill. Nonprofit AIDS organizations tell me that donations are down. Ellen or no Ellen, we have a ways to go.

In my opinion, one effective way to do the most with volunteering is to do it for our young people. After all, they are our future. More specifically, we can help provide legitimate economic safety nets for our needier kids, because some of them aren't going to make it otherwise. I'm talking about scholarships, for those bright students who are going to be our future, our year 2001 in law, politics, the media, medical research, social work, history, etc.

As a commissioner of education in the Los Angeles Unified School District, and as a speaker who travels the country, I have seen the danger signs among the kids that I know. While many gay adults are consumed with anxiety about partner benefits, while some adults are consumed with anxiety about whether kids are having safer sex, the fact is, our young people are consumed with anxiety about just getting through school and into the job market.

More and more, I am seeing the bright lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students from low-income families, or families who have thrown them out, who are going into debt for large amounts of financial aid. One East L.A. girl I know is entering her junior year of college (major in political science) \$20,000 in debt.

Working your way through school is a good American tradition. Many of us older folks did it. But today the game is different—more dangerous, more stressful. Many more kids come out in high school. How many jobs are available to openly gay kids? I've already seen the students who dye their hair back to normal, get rid of their lip bead, cover their tattoo, and act super straight so they can pass at McDonald's or a computer-training program. Today's job training isn't always free, and compa-

nies are selective about whom they pick. In short—for the non-straight student, the transition from high school to college is far rockier than it used to be. The economic load can be just as crushing as those bigoted attitudes in high school.

The arithmetic is simple and brutal. A gay/lesbian/bi/trans senior out in high school + family hostility + rising tuitions = no support for college from Mom and Dad. Or try it another way: A high-school student out + leaving home because of family hostility + living independently + jobs hard to get = a hair-raising economic challenge. Is it any wonder that some kids turn to the street or the sugar-daddy system to make ends meet?

Indeed, some suicides among sexual minority youth can surely be traced to economic desperation. The trend has already been reported among heterosexual youth, as in Boston recently, where a high-school youth coalition demanded jobs and job training from the city government as a remedy for the spike in suicides among them. If straight kids are seeing the connection this clearly, it's time for the gay community as a whole to see it, too.

We constantly hear heterosexual parents complain that a college education can cost well over \$100,000 these days. Some states are thinking of starting tax-free investment programs for the benefit of straight parents. Time for us homosexuals to start thinking along these lines. It is very much in our interests, even for those of us who have no children, to start thinking like parents of our next generation. If the government won't help us, forget the government. We can bootstrap it ourselves, just as people did in the Chinese American community for a long time, when they knew they couldn't count on the "outside world" for startup capital.

Why don't our kids just apply for scholarships? Terrific idea. But it's debatable how many of those thousands of mainstream scholarships might be given to openly gay students. Sexual minority scholarships do exist, but information about them is not widely available, and there aren't enough of them. In Los Angeles, where perhaps 65,000 of our 650,000 students are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, we have half a dozen local scholarships, and I am working to fund raise for one more. Several—out of even 10,000—is a small drop in a very big bucket. We

could probably burn up the national total of sexual minority scholarships in Los Angeles alone.

Scholarships can be rainbowed in variety. For people who have died of AIDS, there could be more memorial scholarships like the Peter Kaufman Memorial Scholarship, given by the Kaufmans, two parents who are commissioner colleagues of mine. There could be more diversity-minded big companies like AT&T, whose gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender employees persuaded their management to give scholarships to openly gay kids. Or PG&E in California, who partners with the Bay Area Network of Gay and Lesbian Educators on scholarships. More local organizations like the Atlanta FrontRunners and the Minnesota GLBT

Education Fund, who offer their own scholarships to local students. More national organizations like Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition International and Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere, and more business organizations like the Greater Seattle Business Association, who all sponsor scholarships. More foundations like Uncommon Cause, who gives scholarships to lesbians, because women are more often in an economic shadow.

Fund-raising possibilities abound, to tweak the imaginations of our most financially creative citizens. The Gay and Lesbian Issues Committee of the United Teachers of Los Angeles did "Bowling for Dollars" for their Stonewall Scholarship. The Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Education Commission got money the hard way—selling candy, holding bake sales and yard sales. Students themselves are banding together to create scholarships—for example, the Liberty Foundation group at Middle Tennessee State University. At Occidental College, the Lambda Emergency Scholarship Fund, given by the Bisexual Gay and Lesbian Alliance, is a model of student-based financial aid. In Oregon, the outdoor variety show Peacock in the Park raises thousands of dollars each year to benefit the Audria M. Edwards Youth Scholarship Fund.

At the graduate level, the National Scholarship Fund for Gay and Lesbian Students needs to be vastly supported if it is going to sweep all our needy students through a masters in any subject. On the side, we also need more community

businesses and more national organizations like Gay, Lesbian, Straight Teachers Network, who will volunteer job training, low-interest loans and paid internships to sexual minority students. Many kids badly need volunteers who will show them the ropes about job interviews, résumés, personal appearance, etc.

Some scholarship prospects also need doctors and clinics to volunteer free medical help—and I don't even include treatment for sexually transmitted diseases here. AIDS is far from being the only health problem that these kids face. I've seen an astonishing amount of stress-related problems among the kids I know—from thyroid problems to ulcers. There's Celia, an 18-year-old who landed a scholarship in spite of her ulcers, but has a ton of medical bills to pay on top of her financial aid. There's Alberto, a straight-A high-school senior, who may be developing diabetes and has no access to his family's medical insurance. I've seen kids whose teeth are falling out because they've been out since age 14 and their families refused to foot their dentist bills. What are these students to do? Succeed in reaching college, only to falter there because of mounting health problems?

Last but not least, we need professional, responsible tutoring for kids driven out of their home high schools by bias—students who are struggling to pass their GED test and get college-bound.

To a kid who has nothing, even \$500 is a lot of money. \$500 buys books. It buys some application fees for college. The kids we help today will be our achievers of the millennium. The ones we don't help—even the bright ones—may end up among the homeless or chronically jobless of 2001. Or they may provide still more heart-wrenching suicide statistics.

As Hillary Clinton says, it takes a village to raise a child. But it also takes a village—ours—to put that kid through school, and launch him or her into economic independence and a proud self-fulfilling career.

Note: Infoseek and other search engines are a good start on locating LGBT scholarship information on the Internet. Search under "Gay and Lesbian Scholarships" and "Financial Aid." One good Web site is Web Resources for Lesbians and Gays at <http://alexia.lis.uiuc.edu/~chapman/index.html>. For a more general search, try FastWeb, which offers personalized scholarship search on the Net. A good printed source is The Complete Scholarship Book, published by Student Services Inc., available through most bookstores.





MARK HUCKINS
Founder

PEACE OF MIND WITH

Mr. Miniblind®

FREE MEASURING

FREE INSTALLATION

\$50 OFF

On purchase
over \$500

Not valid with any
other offer

Expires 6/30/97

OR LIC. #81695



Mr. Miniblind®

• Pleated Shades • Silhouettes • Duettes
• Wood Blinds • Vignettes • Verticals

FREE MEASURING • FREE INSTALLATION

WA LIC. #MRMINSWO618D

Portland
• Beaverton
Washington Co.
(503) 292-6464

Lake Oswego • West
Linn • Clackamas
Co. • Tualatin
(503) 636-6588

Gresham • Happy
Valley
Multnomah Co.
(503) 667-0354

Vancouver • Clark Cty.
Salem • Marion Co.
(206) 256-6622
(503) 363-7993

Proudly
Serving
Our
Community

Cobb &

Woodworth
Attorneys at Law

503-226-0088
920 Crown Plaza
1500 Sw First Avenue
Portland, OR 97201
Fax 503-226-9005

