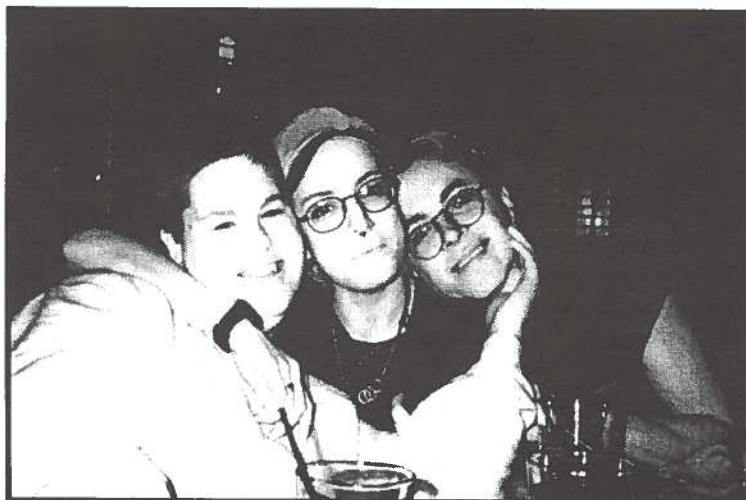

Northern Connection

Queer Youth in Northern & Northwestern Ontario

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THUNDER BAY

YOUTH OUTREACH NORTHERN PRIDE

Growing up gay, lesbian, or bisexual in Northwestern Ontario is still a major challenge. Hostile family, school or religious attitudes create an atmosphere of great difficulty for many youth. Since February, 1995, a support and education group (called Northern Pride) for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered youth has been running in Thunder Bay.

The group was created to assist youth to develop the knowledge and attitudes that will allow them to gain control over, and enhance, their health and well-being. It was hoped to provide an educational component that would include issues of healthy decision making, self-esteem, negotiation skills, safer sex, self-image, stigma, homophobia, community development. As well, it would provide a safe and confidential setting for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered youth to meet, discuss issues of common interest, explore feelings, and share concerns.

Studies have found that oppression and homophobia contribute to higher rates of suicide, alcoholism and drug use among lesbian, gay and bisexual youth. The atmosphere of homophobia and heterosexism in high schools, families and elsewhere, combined with a lack of social support, can make it very difficult for lesbian, gay, bisexual youth to develop the self-esteem that will assist in making healthy choices around sexual and substance using behaviours. The support group has started to address some of these issues.

Participation in the support group is open to youth up to age 25, who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or who wish to explore issues

group, and doing HIV education has shown first hand the challenges posed by homophobia and heterosexism. Entrenched negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians are quite common, but the schools are particularly unsafe for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. Being isolated, harassed, or abused can lead to behaviour choices that put these youth at risk of HIV and other infections. Dropping out and suicidal thoughts or attempts are very real concerns. Parents, teachers, and counselors need to recognize the problem, and begin to work to making the schools safe for everyone, including gay, lesbian, an bisexual youth.

As co-facilitators of Northern Pride, Barbara Spencer and I are prepared to work with any individual or group to help create a safer and more supportive environment for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. For more information, call 807-345-1516 or 807-622-6121.

David Belrose is co-facilitator of Northern Pride, and Education Coordinator of the AIDS Committee of Thunder Bay



(Continued from page 3)

straight people. But, we must always change our reactions and attitudes when dealing with opposition and struggle, especially when we can't directly change others. So, in closing, allow me to encourage gays and lesbians to be proud, visible and not to let the barrenness of winter or the prejudice of some to stomp them out! Stay happy, proud, and most of all, keep warm.

SUDBURY

BEING VISIBLY GAY DESPITE A BLIZZARD

Sudbury, not one of the most favourable places you would want to be during the winter months; mounds upon mounds of snow covering everything and anything beyond visibility, bitterly cold temperatures and biting winds, night invading just as work and school ends. Not to mention, big bulky jackets making you look twenty pounds heavier and hats fouling any attempt at having a good hair day! Plus, add in the burden of being gay or lesbian in this, the city that has more experience and knowledge with a fifty foot nickel than homosexuality. Well, perhaps I am exaggerating a tad. Actually, while the frigid season will forever be my nemesis, I can't say that being gay in Sudbury has been that rough on me, or that hard on anyone I know of, to be quite honest.

Sudbury is best known for its nickel production, the bottom line being mining. I'm sure many northern communities can relate to this because most of this area was established for the purpose of extracting these valuable resources. However, let me be brutally frank for a moment. I don't think that very many gay men or even lesbians are employed as miners. I'm not saying there aren't any but I'm sure that they don't come in great numbers. Yet besides that reality, Sudbury's queer community is striving and growing. It's by no means a perfect haven for those with same sex orientation but it is, in general, fairly understanding of differences; if those differences are not too abruptly thrown in citizen's faces.

While on the subject of the people of Sudbury, let me give a brief synopsis. Many Sud-

clothes flashier than a disco ball and work their days cutting hair and telling gossip. Nothing wrong with that.

My point is that there is a great variety of people within Sudbury and most communities, I would assume. Gays, lesbians and bisexuals are one aspect of this diverse city. In Northern Ontario, due to the smaller population and other factors, most people have not been exposed to homosexuality the way that other cities in Canada and the world have. In Sudbury, gay citizens have slowly made themselves more visible thus allowing more straight people to experience the truth about homosexuality. That truth being, that gay people can have the same qualities, flaws, talents, and yes, even tastes as straight people. Also, they come to see homosexuals in a different light, not as abnormalities but as emotional, respectable human beings. Based on my many experiences, I have to say that Sudbury has been a strong and positive place or me to come out and develop myself as a gay person. Other northern communities can be equally as positive. The key is visibility and positive exposure for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. It is only through experience and knowledge that others can change.

I am not endorsing that you jump out of the closet tomorrow and parade around preaching facts about homosexuality. I am saying that if you feel comfortable, safe, and have considered your options than don't hesitate to take a risk and help make gay life more out in the open; whether it be as an individual, in a group, to many people or one or two people. The results may not always be positive but in the long run it can and most likely will make some degree of difference.

Well, I can just imagine what you're think-

MISTRIAL

People fear what they cannot understand. What they cannot comprehend. What is unfamiliar. It is in our nature. It cannot be corrected. It cannot be cured. It is an innate component of human existence on the whole and it shall always remain. And of all the classifications of groups that suffer from its ramifications it would appear that homosexuals, individuals like myself, seem to be at the fore. True, in this decade we appear to be gaining more acceptance than previously warranted but in most cases there is still fear. Fear which manifests itself as hatred, paranoia, discrimination, and ultimately death.

A crime? What is so immoral about love? Should it matter who it is expressed amongst? In this era, love (any love) should be praised. Not deterred. Pervert? There are no more perverts who are homosexual than there are who are heterosexual. There are more of us who are socially constructive than many would care to believe. But no, we are still monsters. If we were the monsters that the populace at large assumes us to be then would we not take up militant and terrorist action? Wield oppression and hatred of heterosexuals as a sword against the blade that slices at us, forged of the same substance? But no. We do not.

Education is our Excalibur. We inform. We teach. In hopes that we can merely do that which all other people seem to be capable of without worry: live. If there is a closet it is because society and its leaders have fashioned one for us. And if we hide in it it is because society and its leaders have given us no other direction to travel in. No, fear is not abhorrent. Not at all. However, to not overcome that fear, to not understand what it is that causes it, that is the one true

JESS

So here I am. Almost 3 years being an open Dyke. Wow, how powerful. Well, you may want to know how it feels to be a gay youth. That's a hard question to answer. At this moment in my life it's great. A blast. Well until one of the redneck, ignorant people decide to throw rocks at me or one of my friends. I do not belong in this society. I've come to that conclusion.

Walking down the street in Thunder Bay, Ontario, I do not belong. When I walk into a restaurant, I don't belong. Yes, I'm gay, but is that just a word that defines what gender I'm interested in having sex with? That is completely a wrong definition. Being gay is more than sex, it's a way of life. I'm 19 years old, and for the past 3 years I have challenged myself spiritually, emotionally and physically the way that most heterosexual people do not. I have professed my love for womyn and been told not to flaunt. I've held hands with womyn and been told that I was perverted. I've defended myself and others who are confused by their sexuality and been walked out on. I still continue to do the things above to help those who do not understand.

It's hard knowing that because I love womyn, because I have these feelings for womyn, because I want and need to spend the rest of my life in love with a woman, I cannot live a "normal" life. My parents and family have to hide themselves behind a paper bag in fear that they will be criticized. I hate the fact that I cannot cheer my brother on at a wrestling match because he goes to the same high school as I do and everyone knows that I'm gay. Or passing him in the hallways and not being able to say hi or even give him a tap on the shoulder. This is very difficult, but what I find in my life the most difficult is not

I wouldn't change that for the world. I will walk with pride and if dirt gets thrown in my face I will just continue to walk and scream with pride.

Jess Anderson

SHAWN

Tonight I am going to the local gay bar. I am going to have a few drinks, dance to a few songs, and hit on a few guys. Well, I am going to drink a lot, dance a lot, but still hit on a few guys. Our so called gay bar is nothing more than a run down licensed restaurant, with Friday and Saturday nights for all us fags and dykes. It is mostly populated by sleazy old men, and crabby old women. But what should I expect, living in Thunder Bay and all?

This is pretty much the extent of gay life in rural Northwest Ontario, in all its glamour. (Forgive if I am sounding too sarcastic.) Sure I have all my gay friends, and we go out all the time, being as gay as possible, but it is still not a substitute for more gay, or gay positive atmospheres that we can frequent. What do we have to look forward to, being gay in a place such as this? You hang out at the only gay place in the city, and it is nothing more than alcohol, drugs, and old people trying to get into your pants. Now I realize that in a larger city, there is just as much alcohol, drugs, and old men, but there is the added bonus of restaurants, coffee houses and stores to look forward to.

Living in Thunder Bay can give gay youth just coming out the idea that drugs, alcohol, and cheap sex are what being gay is. Well, it is not! But how to find this out? Who to turn to? Your homophobic parents? School workers, you know, the ones that turn the other way when you're being harassed? There is maybe a local AIDS Committee, Women's Centre, or even a bookstore.

Do I sound bitter? Maybe I am. Bitter at who, or what, I really do not know. The people that cause me pain, maybe, or maybe life itself, for being so hard on me. Do not get me wrong, I am not saying I do not want to be gay, I love it. I would not change for the world. It's just because it's been a horrific struggle. But I am past that part of my life now. I think I am bitter because our problems are not disappearing, there are many more kids going through what I went through, and it hurts me, knowing this. I just want it to stop.
Shawn C. Hebert, a strong gay youth, is living proudly in Thunder Bay.

"For what greater injustice can there be than a people who would hate and even destroy their children simply because they exist?" MAGNETO

WORDS

"Freak. Words. Powerful words meant to distance ... to demean ... to destroy the havens of self respect we each carry and nurture within us ... just as surely as they seek to rend the centuries old tapestry we, as a race, have agreed to call civilization. These words carry us away from the light and lead us marching, no — charging — into a darkness where darkness and bigotry reign. Ugly, hateful words as weapons ... and words that ultimately fail to achieve their intended purpose. This ... is about embracing our uniqueness — the color of a man's skin, the choice of whom we love — the right for your neighbor to pursue his individual religious observance. Seeing past their differences, humans ... share a common unbreakable bond. No amount of words — of derision, distrust, or dis-

This is the first issue of Northern Connection, with plans to publish three more issues in the next year. This issue will be distributed throughout the north and northwest as best we can. Articles, stories, opinion pieces, pictures, cartoons, letters are all welcome. We hope this will become a way for us in the north to start get connected with each other, to share our stories, to stir things up a bit. This issue was put together by Dave, Jennifer, Jess, Jim, Shawn, and Valerie.

Permission is granted to copy this newsletter, but please let us know how many copies you make, so we can determine distribution.

Send letters and material to:

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Sudbury, ON P3C 1T3

Write and let us know what you think.

Fax to: 807-345-2505 or 705-688-0423

Send e-mail to : safensex@cyberbeach.net

The province-wide youth line has helped thousands of youth since it came into being. With no government support, it needs our help to continue. If you can, support the 1997 Fund-raising Campaign. Call the Youth Line for help and referrals.



1-800-268-YOUTH

The Invisible Minority in Our Schools: Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth What Can Be Done? Specific Recommendations.

1. Inservice training for all staff.
2. Parent presentations in the evenings.
3. Classroom speakers.
4. Include gay, lesbian, bisexual resources in school resource lists.
5. Include gay-sensitive books in libraries.
6. Establish anti-slur policy in each school.
7. Include discussion of gay, lesbian, bisexual issues in the class as with any other minority issues.
8. Enact anti-discrimination policies that safeguard sexual orientation in teacher contracts.
9. Designate gay-sensitive staff persons at each school site to act as resource persons for sexual minority youth.
10. Implement a program specifically designed to meet the needs of the gay, lesbian, bisexual minority such as the Triangle Program in Toronto.
11. Provide positive role-models, both historical (Michelangelo, Gertrude Stein, James Baldwin) and current (especially teachers and other on-site staff), as with any other minority.

Create An Environment
At Your School Where Every Student
Is Respected