

gay groups work to dispel myths

By Kate Gaul

Gay people captured the national attention and curiosity in 1969 when, during a then-routine raid of a gay bar in New York City, gay people protested the unfair, discriminatory treatment they were receiving.

Gay pride blossomed and became an annual event for gay people in the larger cities; 'out of the closet' became a chiche bandied about for every sort of public endeavor; and even the term gay crept into popular usage for describing a lifestyle particular to homosexuals and lesbians.

Nearly a decade later, gay people still are struggling to overcome the myths that ignorance generate. As women and blacks fight against the myths of inferiority and inadequacy, gay people battle to overcome the accusations of mental and moral sickness.

In Nebraska, the Lincoln and UNL Gay Action Group has provided a social and supportive service for gay people since the early 1970s. More recently, the Gay Awareness Iowa-Nebraska (GAIN) began in Omaha to fill a social and political gap that exists for gay people living in the conservative, Bible-belt Midwest.

After a period of apathy from the Lincoln gay community and resistance from the Lincoln straight community, which culminated in the complete elimination of student funding to help support the Gay Rap Line, the Gay Action Group has revamped in an effort to spur activities for Nebraska's socially alienated gays.

Newly elected Gay Action Group president and UNL student Adam (not his real name) said that the group needs to expand its services and involve more people.

"Social activities sponsored by the group need to include a greater diversity of interests. Previously our main social function has been providing dances and an occasional dinner," he noted.

Coffeehouse, was a popular Sunday evening Gay Action Group function until last summer. Coffeehouse provided a comfortable atmosphere for gay people to socialize, listen to folk singers and disco dance.

But trouble with finding a permanent place ended Coffeehouse, after being shuffled from the basement of UMHE Commonplace, 333 N. 14th St., to above a bar and back to the basement. And so began the weekend trek to Omaha for many gays. Omaha supports several gay bars, but the atmosphere there is not congenial to many gay people.

"The group needs to provide social gatherings not necessarily oriented to the same people. Possibly weekend trips as a group to other cities, such as opera in Omaha, shopping in the Old Market or to Kansas City's Ivanhoe Cabaret for nightclub entertainment," Adam suggested.

"Lincoln lacks a good social outlet," Adam said. The gay bars in Omaha also are lacking the scope of entertainment necessary to fulfill the diverse needs of the gay community, Adam continued.

"When social activity is limited to singles bars, relationships become one dimensional. People go to the bars but they share little ground of common interest," Adam said.

"The bars have heavy sexual undertone and they are the seamier and the most publicized side of gay life. But the total number of gays who do go to the bars are only a fractional number of the entire community. We need a full social base, too," he said.

Adam doesn't profess to speak for the entire Lincoln gay community because, he said, there is a "severe personality split in the community."

Gay people do not have one mass consciousness nor do they all agree on what is needed and how to accomplish those needs.

Matthew was on the Gay Action Group board of directors on-and-off for four years. He resigned recently because of friction within the group and discouragement with group policies.

"The Gay Action Group is too conservative," Matthew complained. He also expressed doubt in the initiative of the group to accomplish any goals.

Matthew was annoyed that plans for a Halloween Ball dance in the Union were scrapped because the board of directors were concerned that the appearance of drag queens (men dressed as women) would not be good for the image of the Lincoln gay community.

"That was a valid concern but taken completely out of text. You would have thought that all the national networks and the wire services would cover the entrance of the in-drag gay community.

"The group is more concerned with appeasing the straight community than serving the gay community."

The Halloween Ball was scheduled to follow on the heels of the successful Coming-Out dance which the group sponsored in September.

Matthew said that the popularity of Coffeehouse and the occasional dances sponsored by the group, such as Walpurgisnacht disco, is evidence that the community, both gay and straight, enjoy such diversions.

"But no one on the board is aggressive enough to rent a room in the Union on a monthly basis. No one is willing to step that far," Matthew said, blaming the inaction on poor leadership, conservatism and apathy within the Lincoln gay community, as well as a hostile, repressive environment.

The Gay Action Group is a predominantly male organization. Only about four

or five women attend the weekly Rap Group meetings and only one of the eight directors is a woman.

Last semester a Gay Women's Rap Group was started and met weekly in the Women's Resource Center. The space grew too small for the group and now about 15 to 20 women meet weekly in the Union.

The group makes it possible for women to meet other women and it serves as a support and social group, explained Rachel, a member of the group. The Gay Women's Rap Group satisfied an unmet need by the straight community and the Gay Action Group.

Some women did not feel particularly welcome in the male-dominated group and some just weren't ready to come out with men, gay or straight.

However both groups now are interested in seeing what the other group has to offer and working together to benefit the entire gay community, Adam and Rachel agreed.

Ruth, a member of the Gay Women's Rap Group, said that there is some common ground between gay men and women.

"Working together to overcome oppression would be enhanced by working together," she said.

However, because of the typical pitfalls in male-female relationships, Ruth acknowledged some problems with working with men. Gay men and women are susceptible to the role playing that the women's movement has focused attention on.

"Women are coerced into those roles by males," Ruth said. "There is a whole spectrum of responses from women to those roles."

One response from gay women is lesbian separatists. They would just as soon not have men in their lives for any reason.

"Lesbian separatists have an effect on gradually diminishing the male energy and hierarchy," Ruth continued.

"Separatists are doing a lot to change men by withdrawing," agreed Mary, another member of the Gay Women's Rap Group.

But separatists or not, gay or straight, Mary said, "women are taking time out just for themselves."

Rachel said that society has placed men and women into artificial masculine and feminine roles.

"Both men and women are oppressed by these roles but because men have a power base to lose and attributes such as gentleness to gain, which they can't see as immediately beneficial, men then aren't willing to give up their roles," Mary said.

Despite misgivings, Ruth said that she thought the Gay Action Group was serving a needed function.

"The group is not doing as well a job as it possibly could," because of the varied interests within the gay community, she said.

Mary said that not all of the women

who attended the Gay Women's Rap Group were definitively gay. She said that some of the women were exploring their feelings and their sexuality.

Ruth said that gay people are only different because society describes them as being different.

"The culture at large is stereotyping," she said, "but sexuality is only one aspect of a person."

Neither Rachel, Ruth nor Mary thought it was particularly difficult being gay women in Lincoln. They said that their straight friends were supportive and at least two bars in town openly welcome gay people.

However, Rachel said that when she first moved to Lincoln from the East Coast she felt alienated because she thought she was the only gay woman in town.

Once she began to meet gay women, she said, it was no longer a problem. Suddenly, Rachel said, she was meeting new women frequently. Now, she said, she is content with a circle of gay women friends.

Mary said that gay women are well-hidden in Lincoln.

"It is repressive if something appears not to exist," she said. There "is a real need for openness. A real need to let straight people know we're just people too."

An effort at openness is being sponsored by the National Gay Task Force (NGTF), Ruth said.

"April 14 is Blue Jeans Day when gay people will be asked to identify themselves by wearing blue jeans," she said. "On that day straight people will be forced to think before they slip into a pair of jeans. Maybe they can feel a bit of the repression."

Adam said he thinks there is an understanding gap between gays and straights.

Last summer that understanding gap resulted in the beatings of at least two gay men at an outdoors gay meeting place in Lincoln.

Many gays are afraid to turn to the police because they will reveal themselves, Adam said.

It's a circle of "gay paranoia" fed by "straight homophobia," he said.

The Gay Action Group sponsors a speakers bureau of gay men and women who will speak to classrooms, organizations and churches about the gay experience. This bureau is aimed at educating straight people in an attempt to dispell the myths about being gay, Adam said.

The Gay Action Group's Tuesday Rap Group meetings at Commonplace and the Gay Women's Rap Group are the only active functions for the Lincoln gay community.

Both groups have an interest in reopening a Gay Rap Line. In the past the rap line was a counseling and referral service for the gay community which, Adam said, cannot be fulfilled by Outreach or other general crisis lines in Lincoln.

Living in Lincoln right now is, according to one gay woman, "like being straight. Pretty dull."

chambers . . .

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didn't think we should be upset. Well now you get the opportunity.

You're the things that are going to be destroyed. Your hospitals are going to be blown up like you did in Vietnam. Your schools are going to be wiped out. Your orphanages are going to be bombed, like you've done to other people. Now since you've dished it out, it's your turn to take it. Let me see the same courage and bravado, your John Wayne spirit manifest itself now that the bombs are bursting on you and yours.

And I'll put my hands in my pockets, and I'll walk down the streets whistling *Happy Days are Here Again*. That's a consolation. White people should think when they create such bitterness in a group of people.

And you think the Russians don't know how weak Americans are? When I say weak, I mean weak in the spirit, accustomed to bullying those who can not fight back. Taking rights away from people who can not defend themselves.

When they won't allow district elections of the city council in Omaha so we can have representation, they don't hook it up to what's happening in the rest of the world, but we do. Because it's just another in a long train of abuses that the colonists, when they wrote the Declaration of Independence in this country talked about. . . . All of the things they said that King George III did to them, was a long train of abuses. . . . What the colonists said against the British can be said by black people against America, only multiplied by 10 or 12 times.

Fathom: How can the problems you raise be solved?

Chambers: Give the black people our due. Give us everything that we're due right now. But that's not going to be done. There's no need in making a laundry list, because it's not going to be complied with.

Fathom: How can individuals help?

Chambers: Let them show (their concern) by the things that they do, and counteract those that their brothers and sisters who do those things, because you're around white people more than me. . . . But white people are not going to do it and I know it.

So I say again, let America continue as she is. But there is a day of reckoning, and

I don't even have to talk about black people engaging in revolution in this country any more, though that very well could happen. I'm looking at Russia, and I'm looking at China.

Civilizations rise and they fall. And I think it's just a matter of time for America. But see I'm going down anyway. I'm going down at the hands of Americans.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if white people and black people who have not been able to do what Martin Luther King said, join hands and say "free at last, free at last, thank God almighty we're free at last." If they can't join hands in freedom, they can share a common crematorium. We can all be vaporized by the same nuclear holocaust. Isn't that a wonderful thought? That's the only way we're going to be together.