

What It's Like In The Life

By SCOTT SHERMAN

While there's plenty of gay fluff on TV: *Will and Grace*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *It's All Relative*, etc., there's only one show that for 12 years has provided interesting, intelligent, and accessible coverage of LGBT issues: *In the Life*.

According to *In the Life's* website (www.inthelifevt.org) "When *In the Life* made its debut in 1992, the idea that gays and lesbians could – and should – have a regular presence on national television was unthinkable. In fact, before the first episode aired, Bob Dole had already condemned the show on the floor of the United States Senate."

Now, the show notes that it is "broadcast on over 130 public television stations nationwide, including all of the top 20 viewer markets, reaching over one million viewers per episode."

In the Life's Pride episode for 2004 is another example of informative and entertaining reportage. It consists of five segments, each about ten minutes long. All of the segments are narrated by Tony award-winning actor Cherry Jones, whose mellifluous voice and perfect diction are a pleasure to listen to.

In the first segment, "Political Science," *In the Life* examines how homosexuality has been defined and politicized throughout the years. Beginning in the 19th century and ending today, *In the Life's* review is required viewing for anyone not thoroughly conversant in their gay history. The show finds drama in the early struggles of activists like Barbara Gittings and Frank Kameny, who are two of the true heroes of our movement. Working with others, they helped overturn the American Psychiatric Association's classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder. By having the courage to challenge the APA's science and bias, these pioneers stood up to a powerful profession and forced

them to see us as we really are: no crazier than they or anyone else. There is moving footage of an APA conference where one gay psychiatrist has the courage to tell his peers that they are wrong on homosexuality, but only from behind the cover of a mask and a fright wig.

In "Bombay Eunuch," *In the Life* looks at a documentary that reveals the secretive culture of Indian eunuchs. Once considered spiritually divine beings who were magical and powerful, Western culture has influenced India to the point where they are considered pathetic and perverse. Now reduced to begging and prostitution, India's eunuchs still find some joy in their role as a "third sex."

"Level Pink" is an interesting examination of how the Patriot Act and the ban on gays in the military continue the ugly legacy of Joseph McCarthy, who equated communism with homosexuality. Catchphrases like "Pinko, Commie, Faggot," linked the two "aberrant lifestyles" in America's minds. Today, the show proposes, the government still conflates threats to national security with sexual deviance. As one talking head describes it, in World War II, gays were fired from the military because they were mentally ill. Then because they were a security risk, then because they supposedly had a higher rate of alcoholism. Now, GLBT persons are excluded for a vague, unproven notion of interfering with "unit cohesion." As one interviewee says, "This is policy that undermines national security, that wastes money, and that leads us to fire badly needed Arabic translators in the middle of a war on terrorism."

Most moving of all the segments is "PFLAG Evolution," which covers the history and future of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. This pioneering group was started in 1972 when Morton Manford was physically attacked at a gay rights protest in New York. His parents, Jeanne and Jules Manford, were outraged by lack of response from the media and police. In a show of support, Ms.

Manford later marched with her gay son in New York's Pride Day parade. As Ms. Manford describes on the show, so many gay and lesbian people approached her during the parade, asking them to call their parents that she decided to start a support group, her husband said, "We ought to have a group to get these people together and talk and set them straight." *In the Life* shows how PFLAG's message of acceptance spread to African American families in Detroit and parents in places like Muskogee, Oklahoma. "All we knew (about homosexuality) was what we heard from the pulpit of the Southern Baptist Church," a mother from that small town says. But thanks to PFLAG, not anymore.

In the closing segment, Harvey Fierstein offers editorial comments on the gay community's responsibility to its younger members. Comparing the raising of straight kids to gay youth, Fierstein notes: "Hillary Clinton says it takes a village. Well, cookies, it might take The Village, Chelsea, part of the East Side, and all of Key West as well." Fierstein concludes his often-humorous essay by urging us to reach out to gay youth and "volunteer some time and finance to make this a safe world for us all."

We all like to be entertained, but sometimes the mind and spirit need illumination and inspiration, too. Make *In the Life* part of your schedule to provide some healthy balance to TV's less enlightening portrayals of our lives.

In the Life airs on Vermont Public Television, usually on the first Sunday of the month at 11 p.m. It's worth figuring out how to program the VCR. ▼

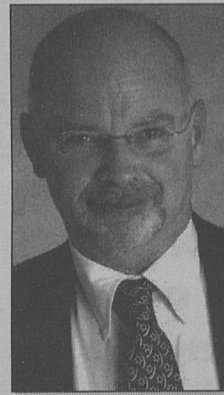
Scott Sherman watches CNN, soap operas, and *In the Life* at his home in Richmond.

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