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COMMUNITY

Talking About Bisexuality, Gender and Sexual Diversity

Vermonters Attend Canadian Conference

BY SADELLE WILTSHIRE AND ANN COAKLEY

TORONTO - What drives some folks to attend a conference on bisexuality and gender? We were drawn by topical interests, academics, networking, or perhaps a place for like-minded people to openly discuss our bisexuality in a safe, affirming place, without having to explain ourselves to the curious. And so, we packed up and headed off to Toronto, Ontario to attend the 9th International Conference on Bisexuality, Gender and Sexual Diversity (9icb).

Held June 15-18, 2006 at Ryerson University in downtown Toronto, the 9icb conference offered a chance to meet with an international bi community, just a few blocks south of the city's gay village. With Toronto Pride week on its heels, it was a great opportunity for some to stay and play for the week. By the way, did you know that in Toronto's gay village, the street signs even have permanent rainbows on them?

There were about 180 people attending this conference, including folks from Australia, England and the Netherlands, as well as many from the U.S. and Canada. It was difficult choosing workshops and activities to attend. There were workshops for activists, for community organizers, for the geek-inclined, for the polyamorous, for the kink-identified, for professional counselors, for the spiritually inclined, and more that were hard to categorize. We were impressed by the amount of hard work and planning the Toronto Bi community took on to realize this successful conference. 9icb was organized as a project of the Toronto Bisexuality Education Project. The organizing committee drew most of its members from local-area and national groups including BiNet-Canada, the Toronto Bisexual Network, Bisexual Women of Toronto and Bisexual Men of Toronto.

Notably missing at this conference was its founder and the "father" of the bisexual movement, Fritz Klein, who passed away unexpectedly just three weeks before. Among Klein's many accomplishments was the widely read *The Bisexual Option*, which includes his "Klein Sexual Orientation Grid," encompassing the complexity of human sexual identity.

The torch was carried by keynote speakers including Loraine Hutchins, co-author of *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out*. She spoke on the vision of expanding spirituality, including honoring the sacred erotic and deeper respect for our one and only earth. Her central discussion on spirituality, a topic of rising interest in wider LGBT circles, flowed into the implications and understanding of erotic and alternative relationships and communities.

One workshop attended was on bisexuals and their families, which evolved into a successful group-driven discussion. In describing our families, one could see the broad variety of our lives: opposite and same-gender partnerships,

polyamorous partnerships, babies, school age children, teenagers, near-empty nesters, and even the opposite-gender married couple that had run into glitches in adoption because of their past queer activism. In this room it was hard to pigeonhole what a bisexual life looks like. What was consistent for this group was their strong, clear vision for their lives and what they wanted, as well as a potent concern for their children.

Bisexual visibility, "or how do you know a bi

There are obvious and powerful commonalities in how we, the B's and T's, are seen and misunderstood in the wider world: as people who are seen as "confused," or worse, "dishonest" about our true identities.



9icb Committee PHOTO PROVIDED BY 9ICB

person when you see one?" was another theme that threaded throughout the conference. This question was posed by Robyn Ochs, a longtime bisexual activist and editor of both the *Bisexual Resource Guide* and *Getting Bi: Voices of Bisexuals Around the World*, in her workshop on "Teaching Bisexuality." To answer the question, we realized that we can't know from our own assumptions, and that bisexuality is a self-selected identity. According to Dana Shaw, 9icb conference chair, one way to describe bisexuality is as "element[s] of behavior, attraction or affiliation" and "attraction doesn't necessarily determine how you live it out."

The links and overlaps of the trans and bi experience were a powerful thread for us, in workshops such as "Empowering Ourselves Through Community - Building: Bi and Trans People Working Together," as well as in spontaneous conversations we encountered. There are obvious and powerful commonalities in how we, the B's and T's, are seen and misunderstood in the wider world: as people who are seen as "confused" or