

Being an American homosexual in Paraguay

by Carrie Coy

While I was living in Paraguay last year, the Bowling Alley - a Favorite dancing spot for Peace Corps volunteers - was shut down by the government on the grounds that it was a haven for 'drug addicts and homosexuals.' The move surprised no one, least of all volunteers who for the most part shrugged and danced elsewhere from then on. Whether the change was legitimate or whether there was a qualitative difference between a drug addict and a homosexual hardly seemed to matter.

Homophobia is such a pervasive, accept aspect of Paraguayan culture that being gay and being communist are considered the country's two greatest sins - both ample grounds for imprisonment or exile. When Aldo Zuccolillo, editor of the country's most popular, suspended newspaper, received a prestigious journalism prize in New York last October, the nightly state-sponsored radio station congratulated him for receiving "an award from the association of homosexual Latin American journalists" and suggested he might also have AIDS.

Obviously the much-touted abandon with which Latin Americans, specifically Paraguayans, kiss and touch

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Eleanor Smeal
In Vermont, for instance, the "bottom line [of inequality for women] is divorce." She noted that a man's buying power rises by 120 percent only one year after divorce, while his wife's decreases by 30 percent. This far exceeds the national average, in which men's buying power rises by 70 percent, she said. Alimony awards in Vermont are also poorly enforced and below the national standard.

"If the ERA passes, interpretation of family law will have to get at this disparate impact by reexamining discrimination against women and disparate incomes."

A lot of women and children will be saved from pain, she said, including the sons of divorced mothers.

"Young men have come up to me and told me their moms had to work two jobs and had to struggle to put them through school. They can't compete with their male counterparts. They've had it tougher."

Smeal has been cautioned not to talk about divorce or the opposition role of big business in her speeches for fear she would lose votes. She has ignored the advice.

"I don't want to back off any issue," she said. As for divorce, "If a man wants to rip off his wife, that's his business. But there are a lot fair-minded men out there. And so many women with something to gain."

each other does not reflect any open-mindedness toward homosexuality. In fact, it is probably only because being gay is so unthinkable that being demonstrative is as safe.

But gay Peace Corps volunteers have lived and worked productively in the face of this rampant homophobia for many years - probably since the program's inception in 1967. How do they do it? Unquestionably the answer is the informal support networks that spring up, evolve and thrive as groups of volunteers rotate in and out of the country every six months; friends who ride hours in dusty buses and walk kilometers in mud on closed roads to be there when they said they would.

Being gay in such a culture - even with the relative freedom of a foreigner - is not easy. The price paid is remaining completely in the closet in one's community the whole two years. In other words, the motivation for joining and staying has to be something other than a desire to affirm one's identity.

While I was in Paraguay, the U.S. staff was relatively open-minded and supportive. Through the staff, names of gay contact volunteers were available to any interested new volunteer. Unfortunately, the climate was changing when I left in October. The leadership had recently changed (Directorships are political appointments) and the program was being energetically whipped into Yuppie-like condition - much to the resentment of most volunteers.

But we do survive and even grow in spite of or because of the obstacles encountered. One pair of my friends ended up in the same small town together and successfully masqueraded as a couple for two years, walking arm in arm in the streets. Their relationship baffled the town who couldn't understand why she played basketball with the Mormons and swam in the river and why he loved to cook and write long letters home. "But you are so different" people constantly told them, to which they could cheerfully respond, "we're just from a different culture."

All volunteers live in a fishbowl and must endure constant scrutiny and, for men in particular, intense interest in their sex lives. Inventing faithful, endlessly patient boy/girlfriends back home is an easy way to explain disinterest in local prospects - it is also a good way to skip Saturday night fiestas where men and women form separate lines and shuffle their feet for hours.

Although volunteers might spend lots of time fantasizing about coming out to campesinos, no one I know ever has. The opportunities to enlighten or even understand the mentality of one's new friends are rare. After people in

her site saw the *Newsweek* cover, "Being Gay in America," one woman discovered they thought homosexuality was something vaguely hermaphroditic.

I had an unexpected opportunity one day to see into that world. My work consisted primarily of teaching farmers basic accounting and inventory management techniques to improve the operation of their small food coops. I heard through the grapevine one day that a key farmer had angrily quit his job and would not return. The only explanation for his sudden departure the other farmers would give me, red-faced and cryptically, was that he was a "homosexual." It dawned on me then why this suspiciously respectful, unmarried farmer/accountant was so marginally tolerated - in spite of his competence. Regardless of who he was or was not, his isolation enforced by the other farmers was almost complete.

There is a huge difference, obviously, between our lives as gringo gays and lesbians and the lives of gay Paraguayans. I think there is a level on which the way we are accepted by our adopted families transcends cultural expectations. This fact was brought home to me when a close relative of a friend was injured and died suddenly back home. She and her lover pieced the story together through numerous emotional phone conversations in her Paraguayan mother's tiny shop. They returned immediately to the States leaving me to deal with those left behind. Shaken and trying to understand the interaction between the two women, Kathy's mom repeatedly asked me, "son amigas intimas, no?" I knew that on some gut level she comprehended their relationship though she never stopped scheming of ways to get to the U.S. to meet Kathy's fictitious boyfriend.

Another distinction - harder than being a gay/lesbian volunteer is coming out as one, in the solitude of one's tiny community. There is a certain resolve and energy that comes from voluntarily sacrificing one's support network that a new convert does not have. Motivated by ill-defined notions of escape and altruism, they are suddenly "out" in the middle of nowhere with a long time to wonder what next. Cutting ties to fiancées and straight lovers long distance might appear to be easier only at first glance. In reality it is a slow-motion exercise in frustration, crossed letters and bad feeling. Luckily friends are there - whether they are incarnated in the shape of cooks, tapes, telegrams, or exist in the flesh.

To end on a positive note, there are deserved benefits to being gay as a volunteer. One admittedly debatable advantage is the ability to avoid the

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