

# Gay & Lesbian Workshops at ABE Conference

Charles Emond

A few months ago, I was in a planning session for the annual statewide Adult Basic Education Conference, when I was struck with the idea of offering a workshop on the topic of Gay and Lesbian History. Our organization has been around for about 25 years, but the topic, even the very word, "Gay" has never been uttered to my knowledge in connection with our conference... or, come to think of it, anywhere else! At previous conventions, I had been tempted to wear a pink triangle or to try to organize a caucus of some sort, but I never took that step.

I was motivated by several factors in taking this step. Firstly, since I have been out to my colleagues at work for a few years now, and have had nothing but support from them, it seemed a logical next step to come out on a state-wide scale. Secondly, I had overheard, a few months previous to this, a remark by a teacher in our area regarding a possibly gay volunteer that worried me. I also heard of two other situations in which being gay appeared to have been a problem for some of the people involved. Lastly, prompted by my deep interest in history (I currently teach a Foundations of Western Civilization course for the Community College of Vermont) I had recently applied to CCV to teach a new course entitled, Hidden History: Homosexuality in Western Civilization.

All this worked together to influence me to propose this radical workshop at the next planning meeting. I knew I had friends around the table, but I was truly surprised at the overwhelmingly positive reaction to my proposal. The others on the planning committee encouraged me to expand it to two workshops, one on History and one on Issues. They took a straw poll of who would attend various workshops and my proposed workshops got the highest number of votes, they in

essence built the conference around my workshops setting them up first in a prime time slot on Friday morning. I walked out of that meeting on a cloud!

During the time between that final planning session and the sending out of the Convention brochures to the teachers in our organization all over the state, I spent my time putting together a major display of gay and lesbian resources and myth-busting posters, including the generous donation of 70 issues of *OITM*. I got brochures from Integrity, PFLAG and other groups and a great deal of help and encouragement from the congregation of MCC in the Mountains.

I also set up a panel for the Issues Workshop which included a male couple, a female couple and several gay and lesbian tutors who work for ABE. The Rev. Fairburn Powers of MCC in the Mountains also agreed to participate as did Rep. Ron Squires. Unfortunately, Ron was busy fighting flu and the Republicans and had to send his regrets.

The first day of the conference, I arrived very early and chose a good location for my display. It featured a large pink triangle and was mainly done in white and black with pink and lavender accents as needed. It had a section with brochures on Gay Christians, with MCC prominently displayed. A display addressing Gay Teens had reprints of articles on the topic and PFLAG brochures. There was a long list of gay and lesbian people who have contributed to the course of Western Civilization and our culture, and a very brief outline survey of Gay and Lesbian History. In the center was a bold statement of what being gay is and is **not** and a statement that the display was mainly for the benefit of those who needed to better understand our gay

adult students, gay co-workers, families and friends. On the table, prominently displayed, was a stack of *OITM*.

As the day went on, I noted that many conference participants stopped to pick up every handout and brochure on the table. I ended up bringing back very few of the 50 or 60 copies I had set out of each brochure or handout. And of the 70 or so copies of *OITM* I started with, only a dozen or so remained.

The display was widely and positively commented upon. I was more than once thanked, by gay and non-gay people alike, for doing it. The comments always included the statement that it was about time and that it really needed to be done. I am happy to say that I got no negative comments at all, although I have not yet read the conference evaluations. I did hear of a few grumbings about the appropriateness of this kind of topic for an All-State ABE Conference, but they were minor and from an expected quarter. I am also sure that at least a third of the participants who passed the display a dozen times during the weekend did not stop, but I feel that they cannot but have been affected by the generally positive reception of the display and the workshops by so many of their colleagues.

The workshops went precisely as I had planned. Dressed in my best "presenters" outfit (a coat and tie) I began with a small cut from the documentary, "Before Stonewall," and broke in by asking, "Who are these people anyway? What can they possibly have contributed to the course of Western Civilization? and didn't gay love start with the hippies in the free love days of the 60's?"

I proceeded to answer these questions and many others by defining homo-

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