



Claiming Our Identity

Taking pride in our queerness. **By Victoria A. Brownworth**

Writing about Pride Month often seems a variation on those elementary school essays on “How I Spent My Summer Vacation.” I think of Pride as a time not just of celebration but also of reflection. As a historian, an activist and a journalist, Pride makes me think not so much about how far we’ve come, but about all that we have not yet achieved.

It’s easy to focus all our attention on the acronyms DADT and DOMA, which tend to stop us in our tracks when we start thinking about civil rights. But if we had marriage equality and military equity tomorrow, we’d still have to address other, less obvious elements of Pride.

Months ago, when I first saw Colin Firth’s Oscar-nominated performance in *A Single Man*, I thought about how fortunate I was to have come out as a teenager soon after Stonewall. I never had to go through life in the closet.

In *A Single Man*, Firth’s character, George Falconer, is emotionally tortured after Jim, his partner of 16 years and the love of his life, is killed in a car wreck. Instead of being able to grieve his loss, George must hide it. The film

is set in the 1960s when there was no societal recognition of what these men were to each other. None. The allegedly “single” man—really a widower—leads half a life because his real life is unacceptable.

But what is most shocking is how little has changed in 40 years. Many queers still live “lives of quiet desperation” and self-loathing. One reason for this is because “Pride” is something that is neither endemic to nor intrinsic in our culture—while homophobia is both.

In 1973, the year after I graduated from high school, the *DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders)* finally dropped homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses. That was a couple of years late for me. I had already been incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital at age 15 for being a lesbian. Being queer was a mental illness that therapy and drugs would change—or at least that was the theory at the time.

I was not the only teenage lesbian in the place, nor was I the only lesbian I knew of who would end up there. Two of my best friends from high school were incarcerated for being queer, just as I had been. As I got older, I met

many other lesbians and gay men who’d had the same experience of having “treatment” forced on them in mental hospitals.

How often does this still happen? It’s slightly more difficult to put your teenager in a mental hospital than it was when I was a kid, but only slightly. Laws now protect adults from “inessential” incarceration in mental hospitals, but parents can still do what they want with their children under the guise of helping them. A 72-hour hold can easily turn into lengthy reparative therapy.

Reparative or conversion therapy (the very name makes clear how wrong its proponents find being queer) asserts that sexual orientation can be changed.

The National Association for Research & Therapy of Homosexuality is an organization that believes in the ability to change a person’s sexual identification. By their own account, they are “a professional, scientific organization that offers hope to those who struggle with unwanted homosexuality.” On their home-page NARTH states, “As an organization, we disseminate educational information, conduct and collect scientific research, promote effective therapeutic treatment, and provide referrals to those who seek our assistance.”

NARTH will be holding a convention and training institute in Philadelphia this November. The group has developed such a large following that it is now publishing its journal in Spanish as well as English and doing global recruiting. One member of the NARTH board, Dr. Joseph Nicolosi, has appeared on the *Dr. Phil* show to debunk the idea that sexual orientation is innate.

The group presents itself as a scientifically based organization. Its president and board of officers are doctors, Ph.D.s and M.A.s. They argue the “science” of how same-sex attraction is just a psychosocial misfiring which can be corrected with therapy.

That was the “science” in 1971, when my parents put me in a mental hospital to “cure” me. It didn’t work. Nor did it work for the many friends, acquaintances and colleagues of mine who had similar experiences.

Yet 41 years post-Stonewall and 36 years since the *DSM* revised its pathological depiction of homosexuality, societal attitudes remain stuck in a time warp.

In the larger society—as well as in portions

of our own community—the assertion that same-sex orientation is a choice, not something as immutable and thus unchangeable as the color of one's skin continues to be promulgated. There certainly is no convention and training session anywhere in America this year for the “conversion” of blacks and Latinos into whites. If there were, the outrage would be universal (even, one presumes, among racists). There are also no groups espousing that heterosexuals change, repair or convert their orientation to queer.

Where is the outrage over the lie that lesbians and gay men have chosen to be queer and thus can just as easily and readily choose not to be so? Or should do so?

Can we have a true celebration of something called “Pride” if a percentage of our own queer demographic continues to want to “cure” itself? And what about all the kids growing up lesbian and gay who are being sent the same message that I was sent—that being queer is anomalous and that anomalies are wrong? Will those kids end up in psych wards to be “fixed” because the pressure to be “normal” was just too great and they attempted suicide?

Pride is about learning to accept ourselves for who we are—queer. Some of us completed that journey years ago. Others, who are still in the closet or still trying to “cure” themselves, continue to be haunted by the homophobic message that we are not fully realized people. Politicians and public figures are regularly caught in gay scandals. Why? Because so many of us don't accept ourselves or one another if we are not straight.

Pride is a double-edged sword. We can have our celebrations, but we also must recognize that the work begun at Stonewall is far from over.

With Pride comes responsibility—the responsibility to continue to fight the damaging misrepresentations of who we are, just as we once fought the *DSM* for pathologizing our love of one another. Forty-one years after Stonewall it's not that we are still being denied our civil rights and equal standing in society, but that we are still being told we can and should choose to be something other than who we are.

Celebrate Pride, but keep on fighting, because the battle for our full personhood has yet to be won. ■

GLENDA TESTONE TAKES THE LEAD



Glee, *The L Word* and the art collective Fierce Pussy—a standard interview with the new executive director of the world's second largest LGBT community center usually wouldn't cover topics like these, but Glenda Testone isn't your average exec. Last September, Testone stepped up to lead the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center in New York City. Smart, savvy and just 34 years old, Testone is the first woman to helm the Center.

As the Center's first lesbian executive director, what are some of your biggest goals for the Center?

The Center welcomes 6,000 people every week and more than 300,000 people every year. That's a lot, but there are still so many people who don't know about all we have to offer. I want every LGBT person in the New York area to know they can turn to us for the services they need. **What do you plan to do for the lesbian community you serve in particular?** Many lesbian and bisexual women come to the Center to deal with cancer diagnoses, starting families or coming out, so we've created programs to meet these specific needs. The lesbian community has done an amazing job building support networks, but there's still so much to do. The women in our community really need

to help each other no matter where we happen to be on our journeys.

Your predecessor, Richard Burns, led the Center for 22 years, so you were 12 when he took the job. Is this what you thought you'd grow up to be when you were that age?

Absolutely not. When I was younger, I was busy sucking up to my teachers—think Rachel in *Glee*, but hopefully less annoying—and dreaming of becoming the next Mary Lou Retton. I thought my future would be gymnastics and boyfriends, and then a husband. Boy, was I wrong.

What plans do you have for the Center's famous ode to male anatomy, the Keith Haring bathroom?

People come from all over the world to see Haring's floor-to-ceiling penis paintings, so I think the best thing I can do to honor his memory is to ensure we preserve it as best we can. We do have an all-gender bathroom featuring artwork by Fierce Pussy, a queer women's artist collective. It's not as well-known as

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Haring's work, yet, but I love that the Center is a place where people can find images and take action that celebrates all kinds of sexuality and gender expression. **Finally, perhaps the most important question of all: *The L Word* is over—may it rest in peace—but if you could be anyone on the show, who would it be and why?**

I would be Helena Peabody, hands-down. I would use my mother's fortune to write a huge check to the Center so every member of the LGBT community in New York would always have a safe, welcoming place to call home—no dance-a-thons required. [Gretchen Dukowitz]