

The "L" Word

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NEWSLETTER
of the
LESBIAN
AGENDA
for
ACTION

When I was thirteen or so, I wrote a simple poem that was very important to me for many years although I did not, in a conscious way, understand why it was important. It was more that I felt it to be true and it somehow made it OK for me to be who I was in the world.

It reads like this:

*I am
a world
alone
and I build
bridges.*

Twenty-five years later, this little five line expression of my young poet self came back to me in the middle of the night last Wednes-

the bottle games.

And my sense of aloneness was very stark.

So then, given the confusion of multi-cultural convergence of cuchi-fritos, knish, chitlins and lasagne; given the limitations of poverty, given the tendency on the one hand to want to knock someone upside their head if they even so much as questioned the rightness of an independent Puerto Rico and the desire, on the other hand, to learn me some good english and go to college; given this burning desire to kiss girls and only girls ... what else could I do but build bridges?

The little poem was, in essence, the formula I would use for survival

VISIBILITY AS A STRATEGY

By Carmen Vázquez

day as I took a break from fighting with my dear cat Lucy who wanted to spend time with me at two in the morning. During my retreat from her, I lay in my bed thinking about this presentation and this old poem kept knocking on my brain and at my heart's door with as much insistence as Lucy. After a while, I decided to just let the thought be, to try and understand why it kept coming in to disturb my thoughts on visibility as a strategy.

And what I came to understand is that what I wrote at thirteen was very appropriate to my life then and, in fact, all true. I was a world - a young person in whom Puerto Rican, Black, Jewish, Irish and Italian Catholic cultures converged; a welfare kid in Harlem being seduced by the possibilities of a Donna Reed white picket fence future whose emerging sexuality was all full of girl dreams and who couldn't stand the boys with their shaking things and clumsy hands trying to grab pieces of me in the closet after spin

in a hostile world. And bridge building is still very much a part of my survival scheme. In prose we call it coalition work which I am an ardent believer in for reasons neither altruistic nor idealistic. I believe in coalitions because my understanding of the real world tells me that my survival is dependent on my ability to close the gaps between the different worlds that converge in me, on my ability to cross over and build alliances - so that I will not be torn apart by my different allegiances; so that I can be a lesbian living in a straight world.

What has changed in the twenty-five years since my young poet days are two things:

As a result of all my tedious bridge building, I am no longer alone.

And, as a result of having found ways to end my isolation, I am no longer content with survival.

I want to live fully and well. I want the coalitions I participate in to have the power to change the hos-

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Visibility as a Strategy ...

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tile world my thirteen year old self had the sense to be scared of. In order to have that kind of power, I must be visible. So must my communities.

In the large scheme of things, my individual experience is not that important. I share it today because it helps me frame the central concept of what I am here to say about visibility as a strategy for the empowerment of lesbians.

I believe that the power to change our individual and collective social and political status requires that we be visible. I believe that the attempt to create rights for ourselves in the courts and in legislative halls can only succeed if we are successful at the work of mitigating our invisibility in the public's mind, in the lesbian/gay movement, in the women's movement, in the social services that we have been central to creating, in the educational systems that shape and mold the minds of every generation, in the literature of our age and the music of our time, on scaffolds, and train tracks and telephone poles, in hospitals and law firms, in all movements for peace and justice ... in ma and pa's living room.

I know that homophobia is alive and well. I know that for most lesbians coming out is a painful and courageous process and that even for the most visible among us there remain times and places in our lives when the closet is an operative and necessary survival tool.

But I am not talking solely about the individual process and decision to come out. For many of us there are times when we're out and times when we're not. And when we're not out it isn't because we're cowards or because we are weak. It's because we haven't the support systems we need to be out and stay out, wherever we are.

To my lesbian sisters I say that there is an absolute necessity of creating and supporting networks, organizations, institutions and movements that don't stammer or

equivocate on the big "L" word, that recognize the existence of lesbians and the contributions of lesbians to everything that can be called human. I am trying to convince you that no movement for progressive social change on behalf of an oppressed or exploited group of people has ever wrung a single "right" from society by cloaking its demands for change in someone else's language or someone else's clothes. I am trying

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to convince you that without organizing to promote our visibility as lesbians, we might be lucky enough to hold onto our jobs or our positioning in another movement — but in the end — homophobia will kill us anyway.

If we don't find ways to promote the visibility of lesbians, then our coalition work will yield little in support for securing our rights because we can't expect our allies to support the whom they don't know. If we don't promote the visibility of lesbians, then our lobbying efforts will fail because we cannot lobby the public or the courts or the congress or the health department or anybody else on behalf of an invisible constituency.

You have heard much about visi-

bility. You have probably heard much about it in your everyday lives. You know that over half a million lesbians and gay men made ourselves highly visible in Washington, D.C. this year.

And there is a reason for that.

Last Fall, I heard Paula Giddings, an historian who is working hard at correcting the silence on Black women's history in this country, say something that I want to paraphrase here. She said that we are seeing the sunset of not only Reagan's administration, but of an entire conservative era as well. And while that is something to celebrate because it is, in part, people like ourselves who are bringing that era to an end — she implored us not to make the mistakes made by progressive movements of the past.

That mistake would be not being prepared to seize the opportunities for lasting progressive social change that we ourselves have made possible. And being prepared to seize those opportunities requires that we be visible, that we be able to articulate the particularities of what it is that we need as lesbians. I never heard of nobody invisible leading anybody anywhere. It just doesn't work that way.

I also address visibility as a strategy because I am sick and tired of hearing about how invisible poor little lesbians are. Enough is enough. We need to change that condition and change it now. I am aware of the obstacles. I know that sexism contributes to our invisibility in the lesbian/gay movement, I know that homophobia contributes to our invisibility in other progressive movements; I know that racism contributes to the invisibility of lesbians of color everywhere.

I also know that internalized sexism and homophobia and racism make us a party to our invisibility and consequent powerlessness.

I don't have time to elaborate as much as I'd like to on how we are to use visibility as a strategy, but I can suggest about finding and strengthening those structures that will support our efforts to become more visible,

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Lafa Sponsors Racism Conference

Racism is something we talk around, not about. When broached we talk about classism, about sexism, homophobia and individual attitudes.

What is racism?

Racism is the whole system of oppression that excludes people of color from economic and political power. A whole system of power and control, it manifests itself in the ghettos, reservations, and on our jobs (or lack thereof). It affects our families, our children, our self esteem — every breath we take. And this whole phenomenon has been reduced to a socio-cultural attitude of "I don't like you because of your skin color." In this way we tend to struggle amongst ourselves, not looking at the bigger picture.

As the Lesbian Agenda For Action (Lafa) we are taking a multi-racial, anti-racist stance. We are committed to racial parity in the leadership of Lafa, but how does an anti-racist view pan out organizationally and in our political work? In addressing these issues Lafa chose to confront racism head-on in next year's conference which will be held in April, 1989.

At first we wanted to educate ourselves — How does a multi-cultural organization work together effectively? How can we tap into the resources and contributions of the Lesbian of Color community? How can we avoid tokenism (placing people of color in visible places with no power behind them)? As Lafa, a multi-cultural, anti-racist organiza-

tion, what does it mean to have a commitment to fight racism in our political work? What are the racial dynamics within our organization?

In May we held an in-house racism workshop. We emerged with a sense of what racism is and how it plays itself out. We agreed to hold a community forum. A work group formed. Through the beginning stages we understood that racism has not been addressed. We chose to sponsor a conference in which the lesbian community takes up the issue of racism - to take the responsibility to know, understand, de-isolate and de-segregate together. Then individuals won't need to feel responsible or isolated around racism issues. As lesbians, particularly Lesbians of Color, we live in a society that insists we

do not exist. The more we encompass diverse lesbians and lesbian concerns, the more effectively we can promote individual and group visibility and power. Lesbian visibility.

Key to the conference are voices from the Lesbian of Color community. We are reaching out into the Lesbian of Color community to invite women to take major roles in the conference organizing with at least 50% Lesbians of Color in



Donna Hitchens, Phyllis Lyon, Charlotte Bunch and Del Martin during a break at the Lafa 1987 Conference.

Photo: Barbara J. Maggiani

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**THE POLITICAL
COMMITTEE AND
PUBLIC EVENTS
SPONSORED BY LAFA**

The Political Committee hammered out a document based on the November, 1987 conference which states LAFA's political points of unity. This document highlights our progressive, anti-racist orientation, our focus on lesbian visibility, and LAFA's commitment to coalition building.

LAFA also organized and sponsored a series of public forums held throughout the year. Roxanna Carrillo and Charlotte Bunch spoke before a large and responsive audience at the Women's Building to discuss international issues in feminism. LAFA sponsored a mayor's night question and answer session attended by the mayoral candidates. Harry Britt, Matt Coles, a representative from Mayor Agnos' office and Ruth Mahaney appeared on a panel to discuss the impact of pending domestic partner legislation and to get input from the community on the structure of the legislation. And recently, we sponsored a supervisor candidate night which enabled the candidates for supervisor to bring their issues to our membership.

The work of the Political Committee depends entirely on the active involvement of interested lesbians. If you would like to become involved, we meet on the first and third Wednesday of each month in the LAFA office in the Women's Building.

—Martha Knutsen

**THE ORGANIZATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT
COMMITTEE**

LAFA's organizational development committee was charged with developing the administrative backbone of the organization, with completing the incorporation process, and with creating a structure to sat-

The Lesbian Agenda and its Committee

The Lesbian Agenda for Action (LAFA) began approximately two years ago when a group of local lesbian activists were frustrated by their seeming inability to influence local community politics. Each one of these women were active in the lesbian/gay movements, and other progressive movements. However, they were forced to realize that no vehicle existed for them as women and as lesbians to work together for their own concerns and their own candidates in the political arena.

The women decided to get together and asked as many lesbians as they could, to join them. The intent of the meeting was to discuss the potential interest of forming an organization that would unite the many voices of the community towards a common goal - lesbian political power.

LAFA grew out of that initial meeting. The new group of women (many more women had joined - excited by the potential of such an organization) decided very early to sponsor a political conference. The goal of the conference was to stir-up, and therefore, further test the interest of lesbians for organizing politically. The goal of the organization itself was to become the means for directing this potential interest into cohesive political action.

Prior to the conference, LAFA agreed upon some of its political goals: To be a progressive organization, multicultural and antiracist, with racial parity built into the leadership

isfy the unique goals of LAFA.

We are pursuing incorporation as two separate entities. LAFA will consist of a 501 (c)-(3) Educational tax deductible non-profit organization with a sister organization - a 501 (c)-(4) with political lobbying potential. In the future we will consider a Political Action Committee arm.

Our basic goals have been to create a structure which leads to racial parity; which gives an active voice to the members who participate in the working committees; and which fosters leadership development. We are looking for a democratic process which reflects LAFA's

political bottom lines and which names the responsibilities and accountability of members and leadership.

Ultimately, we intend for Organizational Development to become the administrative work area of LAFA. We will include the Newsletter Committee, Fundraising, Membership recruitment and maintenance/communication as Organizational Development duties.

If you are interested in joining us in special tasks or with formulation of goals and workplans, or if you just have some ideas, please call the LAFA office. We meet the second and fourth Wednesdays of each

Agenda for Action Committees

body, with an integrated membership reflecting these goals.

The conference was held in November, 1987 and over 500 women from the Bay Area and beyond participated. The response was overwhelming. Lesbians showed that they were interested in their own political future and voiced their willingness to work for it. At the end of the conference, LAFA, the organization was thrown into the spotlight. Women wanted an answer to the questions, *"Who was LAFA, and what were its goals?"* However, members who had worked in virtual political unity on the conference, suddenly looked at one another and realized that the organization had neglected to take time to formalize a structural response to these questions.

As a result, early that December, committees were formed around specific issues: *"Who will guide us and how?"* (Organizational Development Committee); *"What is our political bottom line, and what issues are paramount?"* (Political and Visibility Committees); *"How will we raise funds and develop financial guidelines?"* (Fundraising Committee).

Many questions have been answered, but certain goals are still at arms length. LAFA's commitment to these goals, despite the difficulties of building a multi-cultural, anti-racist organization, remains strong. With the support of an active membership, LAFA will achieve tangible political gains for all lesbian lives. ♦

month at 6:30 P.M. in the LAFA office. Please join us. We especially want women of color to join the committee.

— Sarah Brooks

THE VISIBILITY COMMITTEE

Our invisibility may be the most difficult issue the lesbian community faces. It interferes with effective organizing. It prevents us from recognizing and linking with each other. And it permits the straight world to

ignore our numbers - and our strength - by suggesting we are a small, "fringe" minority. If they cannot see us, they can choose to pretend we are not here, and define us out of existence.

On a personal level, it is disturbing for proud, politically-aware lesbians to be constantly perceived as heterosexual. Perhaps its most harmful effect occurs when it prevents us from recognizing each other, and thus interferes with the bonding, affection, support, and the affirmation we need and deserve, the affirmation that helps us realize our power to oppose their definitions, their stereotypes, and their

plans for our lives.

Invisibility permits stereotypes to flourish. It permits the dominating culture to define a picture of a disturbed and disturbing individual and label it lesbian. Without visibility there is nothing to counteract these labels, nothing to indicate our diversity, our pride, our strength, nothing to encourage our young people to say, "Wow, what a neat thing. I'm glad I'm a lesbian." By standing up to be seen, we give the lie to the assertion we are few in number, or strange in behavior, or denizens of a twilight zone. We bring them face to face with the realization that sexual and affectional preference is a vital and life-affirming part of the lives of more women than they had ever imagined.

Strategies for turning invisibility into visibility are anything but simple. They are complex, and varied, and require the strength of combined numbers, thoughtful strategy, and sustained effort. The Visibility Committee of LAFA was formed to tackle these issues. We met regularly over the winter to develop an organizing and focusing agenda for efforts over the next several years. Each area, and the strategies involved, represents a major commitment of time and resources, but each, if the opportunities are seized, and the commitments made, represents an area in which substantial change and progress could occur.

One of the major issues for all lesbians concerns the lifelong process of coming out. The Visibility Committee saw this a distinct focus for its energies, and one in which LAFA could make a difference. Topics for action included the sponsoring of workshops, forums, on-going support groups, and contacting women in the work force to gather some sense of what the most pressing or disturbing issues were for them in the coming out process.

Another area perceived as critical involved organizing lesbians to make us visible to the media and elected officials around specific issues. We are developing a phone tree so we can respond immediately,

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RACISM CONFERENCE ...

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leadership roles (to include conference speakers, presenters, and facilitators). We have an ongoing program dedicated to asking Lesbians of Color to join us throughout the various stages of the conference.

Racism is an extremely volatile and difficult subject. One of the major goals of the conference is to "begin the dialogue." Racism has been such an everyday part of my existence that unless it was blatant, I could not name it or act on it. Working on this conference I am learning to better understand racism, how it affects me, and I am acquiring tools with which to deal with racism. I am beginning to understand the power play, alienation, invisibility, and pain innate in racism.

Because racism is such a difficult and painful subject, we want to begin the conference in small groups. We hope to break the ice, establish some trust, and begin the dialogue. We are creating racial scenarios and asking, "What would you do in this instance or how would that make you feel?"

For example, "We all the San Francisco Fire Department is actively recruiting women of color into their ranks. Because of the Affirmative Action Program, The Fire Department has specific quotas it needs to fill and has very few women of color working for it. It has one position open.

In the final process an Asian and a white woman are considered for the position. They have approximately equal educational, physical and experiential qualifications. The Fire Department chooses the Asian wom-

an. How do you feel about that?

This scenario addresses racial issues directly - the theme of the conference. The first step is to name it, to identify racism and articulate the dynamics. This is the most difficult step and the one we fear, but silence and refusal to deal with racism is the most powerful perpetuating force. When we talk about racism we can then move forward creating

cial issues as they occur and we are talking about "agenda breaks" in which we temporarily forego the agenda to resolve the racial dynamics. We are learning how to work together multi-culturally. Thus in planning the conference we are developing tools with which to understand and deal with racism in our lives. Tools we can take with us to work, use at home, in our political



Barbara Cameron, co-chair of LAFA, and Roma Guy.

Photo: Barbara J. Maggiani

methods of interacting that are not riddled with competition, alienation, and the demand that we prove ourselves. We can develop tools with which to understand one another through our differences and begin to work together multi-culturally. This is what I am experiencing working with white lesbians on the Racism Conference Planning Committee.

The Conference Planning Committee set aside a block of time at the end of every meeting to address the racial dynamics that had occurred. At first we said nothing - no racial dynamics here. Then we began to talk - it was difficult and stilted. Now we are beginning to address ra-

affiliations, or at Amelia's.

Racism has been reduced to a socio-cultural attitude. Racial oppression is not about attitudes, it's about systematic exclusions of whole sections of people both economically and politically. But in order to change the economic oppression, we must struggle politically - individual attitudes need to change.

If you are interested in this conference (particularly if you are a Lesbian of Color), please contact the LAFA office and we will get back to you. ♦

- MeiBeck L. Chung
Co-chair, Racism Conference
Committee

LAFa Committees...

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and in large numbers, to fast-breaking political issues, and exert a sustained pressure on our political representatives to be responsive to our concerns.

Third, the committee focused on the need for getting more positive information about the real lives of lesbians to schools, civic groups, businesses, and potential political allies. We are pursuing ties to existing speaker's bureaus and developing resources within our membership in this area. Outreach, persuasion, and simply the fundamental fact of a visible presence in schools, organizations, and civic groups cannot be overestimated in combatting the issue of our invisibility.

The committee felt that one of the most important goals in political organizing is to capitalize on the strengths of, and move together as, Lesbians of every color. We supported the initial concept of a racism conference sponsored by LAFa, but see this as merely the beginning of our efforts to become a racially di-

verse and united group of women working together on an agenda that speaks to the problems of all lesbians.

Coalition building is vital to our strength and to our capacity to achieve real and fundamental progress and reforms. We explored ways of making our resources available to other progressive organizations so that we can truly move together as a unified body, supporting and reinforcing our mutual goals.

Aware of the scarcity of resources available to women who want to learn more about their lesbian identity, and to explore the variety of political action strategies available on a personal and political level, the committee felt the need to develop resources for the lesbian community. In keeping with this goal, there was discussion of sponsoring an oral history project focusing on the women who have been active in our struggle over the years in an effort to bring their insights and experience to a larger audience.

Internal networking was the final area the committee saw as a valuable focus for development. An Action/Skills Bank would facilitate

internal networking, encourage members to turn to other members for jobs they needed done, thus reinforcing the fact that our economic base is an important resource to the community and that our resources should be re-invested in the community. Such a resource bank also provides a simpler way for LAFa to call on special skills it may need for special projects.

These goals are ambitious and designed for the long haul. Our members saw them as a focus for directing our energy in ways that would foster the kind of movement we could be proud to be a part of, and which could make a difference in the lives of us all. The success of these projects depends, as always, on the energy, devotion, and hard work of each member of Lesbian Agenda For Action. If you have an interest or ability in any of the core areas we have identified, please contact one of our members and work with us to help build the kind of world in which the expression of love between women is a cherished, and honored, and visible, gift. ♦

—Deborah Nixon

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Lesbian Agenda for Action Membership Form

_____ I am a member and have paid dues for 1989. (Please fill this up to help us update our list)

_____ I wish to be a member of L.A.F.A.

Enclosed is my membership due for the year _____

☐ \$20.00 Regular membership ☐ \$10 Low Income membership

☐ \$50.00 Supporting Membership

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____

Please make checks payable to L.A.F.A. and send to:

Lesbian Agenda for Action
3543-18th St.
San Francisco, CA 94110.

At times, organizations with goals and political strategies similar to those which LAFa is committed to, request access to our membership. Such access will be carefully monitored within the structure of LAFa. Please indicate here if you are not willing to be included on this membership list. Thank you. _____

Visibility as a Strategy ...

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wherever we are. That we find or create networks, caucuses or support groups in our jobs, PTA's, in our neighborhoods and in whatever movement it is that we do our political work. I also suggest that we think and talk about ways to mitigate the invisibility of minorities within our own community so that we can have a whole

and united community that can struggle for our visible inclusion in all the progressive movements, campaigns and events of our time.

I began with a personal perspective and I would like to end with one. Ten years ago, I was caught up in a kind of schizophrenic experience very literally. I was torn by the effort to decide whether or not to visibly and actively be a participant in the lesbian/gay movement. I experienced a lot of pain and terror through that process. I feared the loss of my family's and community's

respect. I feared the insults and physical abuse that I was sure would come my way. I feared the possibility of not finding work that I could be challenged by and be proud of. And most of all, I feared being this "sick" person that the world said I was.

Fear really is the great mind killer. During that process, I at times feared even stepping onto the street because I

might never find my way back to reality.

Pat Norman — she was a counselor once — is the person I credit most for kicking my butt into gear, my self out of the closet and my fear to hell. And one of the things I remember most about my relationship with Ms. Norman as her counselee was her insistence that I was not responsible to any of those fools I feared, that I had within me the power to be whole, to be a lesbian and anything else I damn well pleased.

She was right, of course. My schizophrenic episode ended when I decided not to choose between this community and that community, between my family and my new life in San Francisco ... but to be all of who I am. In this decade of my life, I have congruence—not division. My work has been far more challenging and fulfilling (there has been much more of it) than I ever imagined it could be. And those kids I once feared would abuse me on the streets I have spoken to in the classrooms of this very school and when I have seen them on the streets they've said, "Yo! I seen you in Mr. Valverde's class ... and is that your girlfriend?"

Empowerment through visibility is an indispensable tool for health and for change. That is true for individuals and it is true for movements.

Presented at the Lesbian Agenda for Action Conference, November 15, 1987



Carmen Vázquez

Photo: Barbara J. Maggiani

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