

The fountain of youth



THE TORTURE OF OUR YOUNG CONTINUES: 25% of young gay men and lesbians who come out to their parents are kicked out of their homes, often becoming "throwaway" street kids like the thousands who struggle to survive in cities such as Los Angeles. After Amendment 2 passed in Colorado, the high school dropout rate in that state for lesbian and gay

youth doubled. Of some 50,000 young people forcibly locked up in mental institutions every year, at least 20% are gay or lesbian. Faced with statistics such as these, why do gay and lesbian leaders so often shrink from addressing youth issues?

Ask lesbian and gay youth themselves, and they are ready with perceptive answers. "It's so ironic," says one gay college student. "Our elders are terrified of the youth issue because they're always being labeled pedophiles. And yet some politicians at Stonewall 25 were willing to make NAMBLA *the* issue on which they drew a line in the sand. Why not ask gay youth what we think? You can't find support for NAMBLA with us. If older activists spent half as much time listening to us as they do defending NAMBLA's rights, the movement might really move!"

NAMBLA aside, some have real internal conflicts in dealing with gay youths. Another gay student reports, "I tried to get involved in my local gay political group and ended up getting hit on after every meeting, so I gave up. Gay male culture is youth-obsessed, and youth is idealized, but we're treated like objects. Well, we're sick and tired of it."

On a broader level a lesbian youth organizer explains the failure of the movement to prioritize youth issues this way: "I think lesbian and gay adults ignore us because we remind them too much of their own painful youth."

The good news is that timid support from their seniors has not prevented lesbian and gay young people from organizing on a massive scale. In the past two years, more than 300 local lesbian and gay youth programs have sprung up, 100 in high schools. In addition, 800 college groups are linked via the NGLTF's campus project. During the march on Washington in April 1993, more than 600 young people participated in a Youth Empowerment Speakout (YES) to outline a youth agenda subsequently published by the Bridges Project of the American Friends Service Committee.

Young lesbians and gay men are fighting not only their own fight but also ours. The ROTC issue is reemerging;

the University of California, Los Angeles, now has biweekly vigils and protests—with civil disobedience being considered—challenging the ROTC for being in violation of the university's strong antidiscrimination stance. A University of Minnesota student, Gary Schiff, organized "freedom buses" this fall to take student organizers to Idaho and Oregon for six weeks of work against the radical right's antigay ballot drives in those states.

Sometimes, however, the bitter legacy of a generation of conservative politics—political despair—collides with this burgeoning youth movement. Its influence, ironically, is evident even in the "queer theory" that is currently all the rage in gay academe. As another gay college student told me: "I was an out gay high school organizer, working to change the school. When I got here, I was out to change the world. But now I've learned you can't change the whole system; you can only resist it in your own personal way." Where did he get this idea? From a queer-theory course at college. The underlying message of this ideology is that because our homophobic culture is hope-

lessly dominant, or hegemonic, power resides not in collective political action but only in personal rebellion. And that is a relentlessly conservative message, no matter how many tattoos, cross-dressings, or militantly queer slogans accompany it.

Lesbian and gay youth need all the optimism and empowerment we can give them. In turn, they offer us an extraordinary opportunity. Most social-change movements, if they even last longer than

a decade, have failed miserably to extend hands across the generational divide: Young women too often disdain the word *feminist*. In the '60s we didn't trust anyone over 30. The NAACP is struggling to develop strategies to reach the young. But the established gay and lesbian movement—despite AIDS, despite Helms, despite despair, despite all our isms and schisms—can link arms with this exciting youth movement.

It could be a healing force for us all. At a conference of the San Antonio Lesbian and Gay Assembly in October, an eloquent plea came from a young Latina lesbian: "I'm 26. I'm your daughter. Please get over your differences so you can teach me together!" Our youth are clear: They want us to include them, to mentor them—and to listen to and learn from them. They want leadership training, youth slots on every board of directors, jobs wherever possible. They want the national groups to incorporate their agenda. As lesbian youth advocate Jenie Hall, head of the Bridges Project and editor of the YES report, says: "When the lesbian and gay movement fully embraces youth issues, it will signal the world it has grown up."

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