

A Lesbian Position

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"EXPERIENCING" DEAF AT ECLF

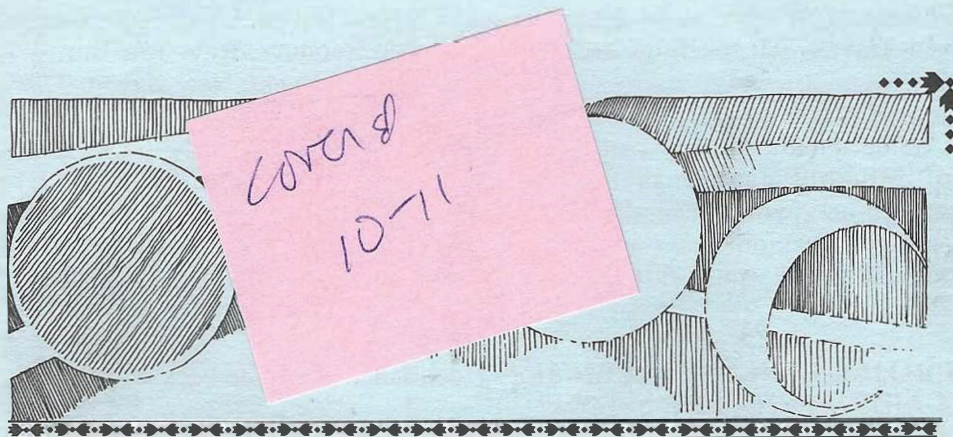
In June I attended the East Coast Lesbian Festival Silent Pre-Fest. For three days I lived with 60 other dykes in silence at an American Sign Language intensive sponsored by ECLF. For those learning ASL participating in an immersion or intensive program provides in some way the experience of "living deaf." Programs such as this are held regularly around the U.S., but never has there been one before specifically for lesbians taught by deaf lesbians. This event sponsored by ECLF was the first of many of its kind, i.e., specifically for lesbians.

Even though there were other lesbians on the land working to prepare for the festival weekend, those of us participating in the immersion lived together in cabins, ate together, and experienced as much silence as we could away from radios, TV's, phones, and other hearing/speaking lesbians. The dykes who attended had

varying levels of experience with ASL—from those who didn't know the alphabet to those with several years of ASL experience. We all had varying reasons for attending as well. Our forms of communication included ASL, writing notes, miming, pointing, gesturing, acting, and so on.

With two deaf lesbian teachers, we took classes in deaf culture, specifically deaf lesbian culture; studied ASL, practiced new vocabulary, strengthened our visual/observatory skills, and worked together to provide our own entertainment. Often we experienced frustration, inability to communicate, awe, confusion, and anxiety; but we also experienced excitement, joy and friendship. And we laughed and laughed and laughed. But more importantly, we also experienced a hint of what it means to be a deaf lesbian surrounded by hearing lesbian culture. There is, of course, no way that hearing lesbians can ever totally know what that

(continued on page 10)



(continued from page 1)

means, but we all came away with some understanding.

I find it challenging to write about this experience. It was a physical/emotional/visual event not easily conveyed in 2-dimensional written English. It's sort of like "you had to be there." So, I'll try putting you into various scenarios based on a few experiences of dykes who participated in the pre-fest.

Imagine that it's your anniversary and your lover couldn't travel with you and you want to telephone her. But you're deaf and can't use a regular phone. There is no TTY and the only way you can "talk" to her is through an interpreter who phones for you. Your intimacy ends up including a third person! [Many deaf lesbians use TTY's—an electronic device that allows them to type messages over the phone lines to another TTY user. If there is no TTY available or the lesbian they're calling does not have a TTY, a deaf lesbian must use an interpreter or a relay service that receives the TTY message then speaks it to the hearing lesbian. Or the deaf lesbian does not make the call at all!]

Imagine that your primary language is ASL but you are trying to buy a T-shirt from a hearing lesbian who doesn't seem to understand that you want to know if she has the tank top in a different size and color. Or perhaps you're telling a story in ASL but the lesbian you're telling doesn't know ASL very well and so you must stop and spell a lot of vocabulary or eventually just write it down—or just give up! [Cornerstone to deaf culture is sign language. There is a spectrum of signed languages from ASL to signed English. It is important to know that ASL is not English in the air, but rather a distinct language with its own vocabulary, grammatical

structure and syntax as has any other language. There are many international signed languages. Deaf lesbians from the U.S., depending on their educational background, have varying levels of English language proficiency. Sign language, then, is their primary language and English is a second language. Deaf lesbians are required by hearing society to be proficient in English and therefore they end up doing a lot of code-switching or depending on interpreters, which is both expensive and not always practical. Communication, therefore, can be exhausting, frustrating, or sometimes just impossible.]

Imagine that you can't see very well at a distance, or that you don't have your glasses on or that you have your head turned. Someone approaches you and starts signing so that by the time you're focused you've missed most of the sentence and you must ask them to repeat it. Or you're just learning ASL and don't really understand much of the conversation and you have to ask the lesbian to repeat over and over again slower and clearer until you understand.

[Most hard-of-hearing lesbians or deaf lesbians who can hear some things with a hearing aid often miss many portions of a conversation. Also, some deaf lesbians use

(continued on page 11)



(continued from page 10)

lip reading as a supportive device. Hearing lesbians who mumble, speak softly, chew gum while talking, or walk away or turn their heads while talking add to this problem. Some deaf or hard-of-hearing lesbians may ask you to repeat what you've said, but after a while it becomes embarrassing and most likely she will eventually give up. Shouting or making exaggerated mouth movements to a deaf or hard-of-hearing lesbian is not only insulting, but it also doesn't help.]

Imagine you're a hearing lesbian but you're participating in an immersion program. You can hear but you cannot talk because you're supposed to be "deaf" and can only communicate as if you can't hear (through sign or gesturing or whatever.) But you can still hear and what you hear is very revealing. Remarks such as "Oh, you're one of those," or, "Don't talk to her—she's deaf," or, "Do we have to be quiet because she's here?" become commonplace. Also, because you can't communicate to the "talkers," you eventually just ignore them. You become not only invisible to others, but they become invisible to you as well.

[Need I say more? There is a lot of misunderstanding between lesbians of different languages and often attempts to cross those barriers are not taken on. If a lesbian is perceived as "handicapped" or "stupid/dumb" or "without language" because she is deaf, then those barriers sometimes become insurmountable. Hearing lesbians should not avoid or patronize or be condescending to deaf lesbians.]

These were just a few of the experiences shared by the lesbians at pre-fest.

Mev Miller

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—NEWS—

THE INTERNATIONAL LESBIAN AND GAY Association (ILGA) protested at the Mexican Embassy in Paris against the brutal murders of 5 gay activists in Mexico-City. The Mexican Ambassador, Mr. Manuel Tello, accepted a protest letter denouncing the killings and the systematic violence against lesbians and gay men in Mexico and promised to investigate the murders. ILGA expressed its anger about the aggressive behavior of the police and lodged a complaint with Minister of the Interior, who is responsible for the police.

ILGA

IN AN INTERVIEW PUBLISHED June 25, 1992 in *The New York Times*, President George Bush stated that he "can't accept as normal life style people of the same sex being parents...I don't accept that as normal" and added that he believes in "traditional family values." As the Republican National Convention approaches, Republican officials are espousing "traditional family values" rhetoric and attacking the gay community as antithetical to family life.

Currently only 11 states have laws that say sexual orientation is irrelevant in custody disputes. Courts in 11 other states have based rulings on the belief that gay people are unfit for custody of their children solely on the basis of sexual orientation. Two states, Florida and New Hampshire, have laws expressly prohibiting lesbians and gay men from adopting children. New Hampshire also bars lesbians and gay men from becoming foster parents.

NGLTF

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"EXPERIENCING" DEAF AT ECLF (continued from last month's LP)

...These were just a few of the experiences shared by the lesbians at pre-fest. At the end of the three days, we all got together for an evaluation meeting and debriefing. We looked at each other in the circle and began to yell and scream and sing and use our voices again. It was startling. We then began to talk to each other about our experiences and what was told was truly amazing.

First of all, and somewhat surprisingly, we experienced some "loss" at being able to talk again. It felt funny to us and many decided to remain silent throughout the remainder of the festival. Also, we had met many other new lesbians and discovered

who they were in a specific context. It was then strange to hear what their voices sounded like. One dyke mentioned that she realized that for three days, the most predominant sound she heard was that of laughter.

Several lesbians talked about the kind of physical reaction they had. Fat lesbians talked about being freed to move and use their bodies in a way they normally would not. Several shared the insight that signed language—or language that involves the use of one's body is really a woman's language. It involves being in your body in a way many of us are. But it was also hard for others—especially incest survivors or women from stifling backgrounds—because they were not comfortable in their bodies! And there was a great deal of sexuality about it all too. True, we did learn some sign vocabulary for sex and sexuality. But there was a way that we experienced sensualness and sexuality in very positive ways because we could not talk and had to rely on physicalness!

(continued on page 14)



NOTICE: Due to increased production costs, *The Newsletter* is losing money. We have decided to raise advertising rates rather than subscription rates. The following new rates will come into effect November 1, 1992: business cards, housing, and classified ads \$7, vertical business cards \$10, quarter page \$14, half page \$22, full page \$40, inserts \$75. Non-profit organizations will continue to receive a 50% discount for all ads except inserts.

(continued from page 1)

Others described that emotional experience of the three days. Sign language can be more intimate and communicative because before you can sign, you must have someone's attention! They must make eye contact with you. Also, because ASL depends so much on facial expression and the use of space, the only way to convey any emotion is by making your face and body match that emotion. For three days, many of us had our emotions more on the surface than we normally would. We experienced a lot of frustration and confusion which transformed into friendship and comfortableness. We helped and supported each other. We learned patience and understanding.

Hard-of-hearing lesbians expressed the great relief they felt at not always having to be the ones to ask for others to repeat themselves. For three days, they were able to participate more equally and not always feel left out. Some expressed their ability to

better accept their hearing loss as a result of the experience.

Some lesbians talked about starting to dream or think in sign. For some who have a hard time being quiet or not talking, the three days was especially challenging. At first there was fear, then concern but because the atmosphere was non-judgemental and open and relaxed, those concerns dissipated and those lesbians ended up having a great time.

Overall, it was an incredibly positive experience. (If there was any negative stuff, it was never brought to my attention.) The two deaf lesbian teachers were incredible. They helped all of us by being patient, confident, generous and talented. And both of them possessed great senses of humor and had contagious smiles. I would highly recommend this experience to all lesbians. So, get ready; I think ECLF will do it again next year!

Mev Miller

