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LIFESTYLES

Secret lives

Fear keeps Thunder Bay's small gay community in the closet

By BOB HEARN

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THEY'RE bold and proud in private and amongst themselves, but scared of the reception they may face going public.

For many of Thunder Bay's gay population, life here is cloistered and secretive. Dances and socials are held once every two weeks, at a secret location because gays fear for their safety, says one gay man.

"I'm afraid of walking on the streets here after 11 p.m.," said Doug Broman, 43. "I've been chased by people just off of Cumberland Street just because of who I am. Some have verbally challenged me in public, called me all sorts of terrible names."

Broman is one of the more recognizable gay faces in the city, as he hosted the television show Thunder Gay Magazine on Maclean-Hunter Cable TV for three years until he ended it in 1991.

He knew by raising his profile in the community, he was leaving himself open to attack.

"There's very much a frontier, small-town mentality in Thunder Bay and a lot of people just can't deal with gay people around here," he added.

"I just don't go into bars; it's an invitation for disaster," he said. "You learn to live life with caution. It makes me angry that we're all raised to believe that heterosexual love is the only kind."

For Kari, 23 and Candace, 20, (not their real names) being young and gay in Thunder Bay poses its own set of problems. Kari was kicked out of a city shopping mall after a security guard took offence to her girlfriend sitting on her lap on a bench.

"The biggest problems come from teenaged boys," she said "I've seen them come up and hit people, chase them, call them faggots. I pulled this guy off a high-school friend of mine once after he beat him half-unconscious. He was kicking him in the head."

High schools, complete with young men just coming to terms with their sexuality, are the worst places for homophobic attitudes. It's also where most gay-hashing occurs, said Candace, who adds it's a way for young men to prove their manhood.

It makes them look tough by "beating up a fag."

The gay scene here is very cliquish, added Candace. Along with gay socials every two weeks, many older people have private dinner and house parties for those who aren't into the dancing.

"We get people as young as 15 and as old as their seventies who show up at them," said Darren, 18 (not his real name). "You'd be surprised at who shows up at the dances. Businessmen, government workers, teachers -- people you'd never expect of being gay or bisexual."

1,500 GAYS

Broman estimates there are close to 1,500 gay people in the city, but there are very few places for them to go.

"It's a small, claustrophobic atmosphere," he said. "It's always difficult to live in smaller communities when you're gay,"

Broman, who moved to Thunder Bay 15 year ago from a small Northwestern Ontario town, says homophobic thinking is becoming less mainstream. But there's still a small group who genuinely hate him and he knows why.

"They don't like me because I'm stepping on their rigid, religious, patriarchal beliefs." he said. "And they can't keep up with change."

"But most people don't dislike homosexuals, they dislike homosexuality. They don't wake up in the morning and start thinking about how disgusting fags are. They don't care."

Broman said many young gays here often move to larger centres like Toronto to "come out." They liberate themselves in the large, established gay community of the larger city and return to Thunder Bay later when they feel more secure about themselves.

"I've gone to gay bars in Toronto and seen tons of Thunder Bay people in there," he said.

Gays, Lesbians and Bisexuals of Thunder Bay, a support group established 13 years ago dedicated to helping gay people in the city deal with their problems.

Darren is a phone volunteer with the group. He has known he was gay since he reached adolescence. And his parents have dealt with his homosexuality surprisingly well. He just told them last week that he was gay.

But it's still heady stuff for an eighteen-year old to dispense advice to callers who are generally much older.

"I've had calls where a man found his divorced mother in bed with a young woman. He didn't know what to do," he said. "Another man phoned and said he wanted to sleep with his best friend but wasn't sure if he was gay. He wanted to know how to approach him."

Education is the key to overcome homophobic attitudes, Candace said. But she feels Thunder Bay is too isolated and its residents are unreceptive to alternative lifestyles.

"You have people here who don't even want sex education taught or condom machines put in the schools because it's 'dirty.'" she said over coffee and cigarettes at a doughnut store recently.

"I'm not real big on public shows of affection from anyone," she continued. "But why should a gay couple be scared to walk down the street holding hands?"

The gay men interviewed don't look or act flouncy and the women aren't crew-cutted "butches" - unlike the sexual deviants caricatured by popular culture. And Kari is tired of trying to explain why she is a lesbian.

"What I do in my own bedroom is nobody else's business," she said. "I don't want to know about other people's sex lives. Why should someone get so angry about mine?"

-30-



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Doug Broman former host Thunder Gay Magazine