



P.O. Box 24565 Los Angeles, CA 90024 (310) 472-8952 <http://www.pflagla.org>

December-January 2002

Newsletter 214

OUR MISSION

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) promotes the health and well being of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered persons, their families and friends through: **support**, to cope with an adverse society; **education**, to enlighten an ill-informed public, and **advocacy**, to end discrimination and to secure equal civil rights. PFLAG provides opportunity for dialogue about sexual orientation, and acts to create a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity.

Our meetings are always held on the 3rd Tuesday of each month at the Westwood United Methodist Church, 10497 Wilshire Bl., NE corner of Wilshire and Warner. Take 405 Freeway to Wilshire Bl. East exit. Continue 1.5 miles. The entry on Warner has an elevator; another entry is through the sanctuary to the corridor, then upstairs to the Fellowship Hall - 3rd floor. There is also easy access from the north driveway. Doors open at 6:30 pm; general meeting begins at 7:25 pm.

PFLAG starts each meeting with a rap group where individuals can share their concerns, questions and understanding about and with the gay person or persons in their families. After the rap session, we generally have a speaker or panel of speakers whose topic includes subjects pertinent to the families, gays and lesbians. If needed, a separate group for people wishing to share and learn about people with AIDS (PWAs) is held, along with a Spanish speaking support group facilitated by Spanish speaking parents.

OUR NEXT SPEAKERS

December 18, 2001

Jane Drucker, author, Life Strategist, Career Coach, and lecturer, holds advanced degrees in education and psychology but is still trying to figure out what to be when she grows up. As a lifelong counselor and educator, she writes and speaks out passionately for the civil rights of the lesbian and gay community. Her book, "Lesbian and Gay Families Speak Out" is becoming widely read throughout the country and on college campuses across North America and is opening a window to the diversity of family life in America. Dr. Drucker is devoted to working toward the day that all people and all families will be treated with equal respect.

January 15, 2002

Albert J. Winn is a photographer and writer living in Los Angeles. He received his MFA in Photography from Cal Arts in 1991. He was awarded an individual National Endowment for the Arts/Western States Arts Federation Fellowship for "My Life Until Now," an autobiographic collection of stories and photographs about his life as a gay Jewish man living with AIDS. He is also the creator of "Blood on the Doorpost. . . The Aids Mezuzah." Recent exhibits of his work were held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Skirball Cultural Center. His work is in permanent collections of The Library of Congress, The Jewish Museum of New York, and Syracuse University.

IT'S THEATER TIME!

The play **THE SUM OF US** deals with the relationship between a gay man living with his father and is showing at the Zephyr Theatre at 7456 Melrose Ave. Thru November 25th. Tickets 310.289.2999.

HELPLINES, CHAPTERS & CONTACTS 9 am to 9 pm**Area Code 310**

West LA: 454 6681 (Liz) LIZARM@aol.com
West LA: 472 8952 (Adele)
South Bay Chapter: 373 2351

Area Code 323

291 2990 (Elfi Martin)

Area Code 562

Long Beach Chapter: 403 1234

Area Code 626

Pasadena Chapter: 914 1241 (Denny)

Area Code 661

Santa Clarita Chapter: 254 2177 (Peggy)

Area Code 714

Orange County Chapter: 997 8047

Area Code 805

Ventura Chapter: 498 4964 (Rita or Steve)

Area Code 818

Studio City: 788 8678 (Lynette) Lynette114@aol.com
Woodland Hills: 340 8945 (Irene & Alvin)

Area Code 909

Claremont Chapter: 624 6134
Redlands Chapter: 335 2005 (Kathy)

Area Code 949

South Orange County: 380 7035

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

If there is anything you would like to see in the newsletter, please e-mail me at haichi_ca@hotmail.com, call me at (323) 460-4849, or just drop me a note at our PFLAG meetings! Happy Holidays, Chris Haiss

OTHER HELPLINES / RESOURCES

Spanish Speaking:
(213) 487 4992 (Silvia)
(310) 453 8506 (Angela)

African American:
(323) 731 0888 (Shirley)

Asian Pacific Islander:
(818) 368 2008 (Ellen) HKameya@juno.com

Parent of person with AIDS:
(818) 342 1064

LA Gay & Lesbian Center:
(323) 993 7400

Straight Spouses:
(626) 449 3267 (Onnolee)

TREVOR - 24 hr suicide prevention line
for gay, lesbian, bisexual and questioning youth:
(800) 850 8078 www.trevorproject.com

Merging Identities:
One of the National Conference for Community & Justice's programs that helps gay, lesbian and bisexual youth develop positive identities relative to sexual orientation, culture, religion and family.
(213) 250 8787 www.nccjla.org

Hablando Entre Hombres
Spanish support group for Latino Gay Men
(213) 273 8723 (Ramon Ramirez)

PFLAG National
(202) 467 8180 www.pflag.org

PFLAG's Transgender Special Outreach Network (TSO):
Karen Gross (216) 691 HELP / KittenGr@aol.com
Mary Boenke (540) 890 3957 / maryboenke@aol.com
www.transfamily.org

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

As the Holiday season quickly approaches we have a lot to be thankful for. If our readers haven't done so already, I hope that everyone can respond and renew your membership in PFLAG or make a year end contribution. We are always grateful for any amount you can afford.

If you haven't been to a PFLAG meeting in a while we ask that you go to our website www.pflagla.org for a list of our upcoming speakers. There's a saying that remains true to this day, when you no longer need PFLAG, THAT'S when PFLAG needs you. Please make time on your calendar to be part of our organization. We must remain vigilant in our mission and keep fighting the good fight. Check out the website www.pushesreport.com to see an example of how much misinformation is right in our own backyard.

The path towards Civil Unions in California has begun!

California Assemblymember Paul Koretz has introduced legislation in AB 1338 that mirrors Vermont's current law. Certainly this will be a major breakthrough if it becomes law in our state. However, there are several hurdles that must be cleared before it even comes up for a vote in the legislature. Contact your local state senator or assemblymember and tell them you support Assembly Bill 1338.

Finally all of us at PFLAG Los Angeles send out our condolences to the families affected by the tragedies of September 11th. Now more than ever it is important to find courtesy and respect for people who are different from what is familiar to us.

George Unger - Co-President PFLAG Los Angeles

From The Editor

Dear Newsletter Readers,

For over a year now I have been your newsletter editor. I'd like to take this opportunity to say thanks to all of you who've submitted articles, shared their stories, and helped in making our publication interesting. A very special 'Thank You' goes to Walter Lippmann for his movie reviews.

Though it's never possible to please each and everybody all the time, I try to give you an overview on what's going on on the homefront as well as the rest of our world. In this issue, you'll find an article on Berlin's gay mayor. That might not necessarily be important for us in Los Angeles, but it shows how things CAN be if we're willing to accept that GLBT folks are as capable as everyone else.

It's scary to see how some purposely bash GLBT people. I assume that most of you have heard Rev. Falwell's quote on TV's "The 700 Club", September 13, 2001, in regard to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center: "I really believe that pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way – all of them who have tried to secularize America – I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'"

This reminded me immediately of Pat Robertson's remarks back in 1998 in regard to Orlando/Florida and rainbow flags. Triggered by Robertson's accusations, Janis Walworth (Center for Gender Sanity / <http://www.gendersanity.com>) wrote the article "Do Unnatural Acts Cause Natural Disasters?", which you can read on page 8.

It's so important that we ALL speak out when someone is put down, harassed, or attacked, solely for the reason that s/he's "different". The other week I met a young woman at a conference and she told me how for the past four years she's been talking to Latino parents about being gay. She isn't gay, but her brother is. After her brother's best friend killed himself because of being gay and not accepted by his own family, she was afraid that she might lose her brother. Thanks to all of you who speak out on all of our behalf and of those who can't speak for themselves.

Again, it's not a question of being old or young, black or white, gay/lesbian/bisexual or straight, male, female, or transgender; it's a question of how we treat each other as HUMAN BEINGS.

A Happy New Year to you and your loved ones!

A PFLAG Couple Committed to Helping Gay Youths (Excerpt)

When their son Scott came out 11 years ago at age 23, attorney Larry Sperber and his wife Lynette were neither stunned nor upset. A parent can sense these things, Larry says. While accepting, the Sperbers were clueless about what to do with the information that their son was gay.

"We basically didn't know much about the gay culture back then. When my wife found out about PFLAG [Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays], we went to a meeting to educate ourselves," Larry says.

Admitting they weren't quite sure how the organization would help, they nonetheless stuck with it, attending support groups and various functions. The first couple of years they went fairly regularly and from that they became some of the most active PFLAG families in the nation. Larry eventually served as president of the national chapter for two and a half years. Before that he was a board member on the Los Angeles chapter and before that a facilitator.

A practicing criminal defense attorney for 28 years, Larry Sperber was not only surprised at how little the community at large knew about the gay community, he was shocked at how much young people, struggling with their sexuality, had to endure. "During his high-school years, my son was subjected to taunting, called a faggot; he was teased, picked on, bumped into simply because he wasn't perceived as macho. He was perceived as gay, even though he wasn't out of the closet. And Scott did not feel safe to tell us about it because he was afraid."

The wish to help others like his son motivated Sperber, now 56, to champion the safety of children on campuses. That's why high on Sperber's priority list is Project 10--a program in the Los Angeles Unified School District that provides a safe place for LGBT students on campus where they can meet with counselors and teachers to discuss a variety of issues.

"There is an immense need to have this project grow in schools across the country--and to have the schools adhere to it," Sperber says. "Ironically, the teachers and counselors in some areas are afraid to be too involved for fear of them being ostracized and/or harmed by homophobic parents. But it's crucial that all students can feel safe in their sexual orientation, particularly in school. And the only way to do that is through education."

How did a family man with absolutely no prior involvement in gay-rights issues become such an advocate? "It goes back to my son, Scott. My wife, our two daughters and I have never felt anything but support for Scott and his sexuality. Other kids aren't so lucky. So many get tossed out of the house at age 13, 14 or 15 simply because of ignorance. It's different if you're a person of color. You can go home and know that your family is like you. When you're gay, you don't have that same identification."

That's why education is so important, Sperber says, in that it helps people realize that being gay is not a choice. "Who would choose to be part of a group that is constantly harassed, discriminated against, threatened and, oftentimes, physically harmed?" he asks.

Larry and Lynette's son, Scott Silverman, 34, describes his parents as "courageous and amazing," saying they're more involved with the community than he is. And Scott refers to himself as the gay Prince Charles: "I'm treated like a prince by my parents."

A standup comedian, Silverman says he gets some of his best material from his experiences with his parents. "When kids come out to their parents they get tossed out of the house. I got an Acura ..."

Further evidence of Silverman's unique upbringing comes when he notes that his last boyfriend "told me that my best feature was my mother!" But he also asserts that there would be no way that he could ever have been able to pursue his career as a comedian if he didn't come from such a supportive place. "My good foundation feeds my ego."

Having such involved parents has had the ironic effect of turning the tables in terms of societal acceptance. Instead of them worrying about his safety, he worries for theirs. "They were in the pride parade in San Diego last year and there was a bomb threat. Those are the things that they shouldn't be having to deal with," he says.

Do his parents ever have words of caution for him? Actually, no. "They only want me to be happy. But they would like me to get famous soon," he says. "My mom always says that Betty DeGeneres steals her spotlight."

One would think that in Larry Sperber's traditionally conservative profession, he would be regarded with raised eyebrows and/or aversion from his colleagues. "I basically separate my professional life from my activist life. But I always wear my PFLAG pin on my lapel--even when I go to court. That way, if anyone asks me what it means, I can educate them," he says. What about with his friends and extended family? "My wife and I decided early on that our son was the most important. If any family or friends would object, we would make it clear that we would not tolerate such negative comments. If they persisted, we just cut them off ... Or, at my country club, I always tell the other guys on my golf foursome. That way I find that they catch themselves before saying something negative. My wife always immediately addresses the situation before it takes place. We need others to know who we are and where we stand. We will not tolerate prejudice."

How did Sperber become so evolved? "The truth is, I never had a problem with anyone's orientation even before my son came out. In 1963, I was at CW Post College on Long Island in New York. There were four male friends in our group who never officially said they were gay, although all of us knew. But it didn't make any difference, because they were our friends."

Sperber believes that with a little education, almost anyone can achieve the same level of acceptance he has. "People just need to know the gays and lesbians around them."

Although not serving as officers, the Sperbers will continue to speak on behalf of the organization while continuing their advocacy.

SPREADING THE WORD IN THE COMMUNITY

- Larry and Lynette spoke to their temple congregation during High Holiday Services about their love and joy of being a part of Kol Ami, a gay and lesbian temple and the pride of being parents to their three children, one of whom is gay.
- Larry and Lynette attend Chief Bernard Parks Citizens Forum Committee Meeting.
- Larry and Lynette attend Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center's Dinner honoring supporters.
- Lynette and Larry attend Committee Meeting on LGBT Family Alliance Coalition.
- Larry and Lynette speak to Women's Coming Out Group at Gay and Lesbian Center.
- Lynette attends Marriage Coalition Meeting at Gay and Lesbian Center.
- Larry and Lynette speak to Men's Coming Out Workshop at Gay and Lesbian Center.
- Lynette, Angie Kiel, Marty Olson and Stuart Huggins speak to 400 students at St. Genevieve High School.
- Larry and Lynette and their son, Scott, are featured in an article in the October 27 issue of Frontiers Magazine. (see page 4!)

ANNOUNCING SPEAKERS BUREAU TRAINING MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Saturday January 26th 2002 at 8:30AM. LOCATION - MCC Church on Santa Monica Blvd in West Hollywood.
WHO SHOULD ATTEND - If you're interested in going into schools and organizations in Southern California to represent PFLAG and you have the flexibility to do so during the daytimes hours Monday-Friday.

The training session should last until 3:30PM and is open only to those people who register in advance. For registration and more information send an email to sjgeo@rocketmail.com or call 323.848.7801.

GOVERNOR DAVIS SIGNS AB 25, BOOSTING RIGHTS OF GAY, LESBIAN AND SENIOR COUPLES SIGNIFICANTLY

SACRAMENTO (October 14, 2001)

Today, Governor Gray Davis approved AB 25 with his signature. The new law is the largest expansion of domestic partners rights in the country. It will add several new legal protections to eligible couples that register in the state of California as domestic partners. AB 25 was sponsored by CAPE, California's statewide gay and lesbian lobbying organization, and authored by Assemblymember Carole Migden.

The new law provides partners, same-sex couples and opposite-sex senior couples, with more legal benefits and stronger protections beginning January 1st of 2002.

As enacted under AB 25, domestic partners who register with the Secretary of State will have the ability to:

- Relocate with a domestic partner without losing unemployment benefits.
- Use sick leave to care for an ill partner or the child of a domestic partner.
- Be exempt from state income tax the health benefits provided to domestic partners.
- File disability benefits on behalf of an incapacitated partner.
- Make medical decisions in the hospital or act as a conservator.
- Sue for wrongful death as well as seek damages for negligent infliction of emotional distress.
- Administer a partner's estate.
- Bequeath property to a domestic partner using the statutory will.
- Adopt a partner's child using the stepparent adoption process.
- Continue health benefits for surviving partners of government employees and retirees.

Additionally, AB 25 requires health plans to offer domestic partner coverage to businesses and associations similar to coverage offered to dependents of employees and subscribers. This requirement will assist small and medium-sized employers that decide to offer domestic partner benefits to their employees.

Finally, this measure will change present law to allow opposite-sex couples to register as domestic partners if one or both of the partners are over the age of 62.

"QUOTE - UNQUOTE"

"In California, a legal marriage is a marriage between a man and a woman. That is the law of the land and that is not going to change. The bill I'm about to sign is about responsibility, it's about respect, and most of all, it's about family. And it's about time. This will be one of the strongest domestic-partnership bills in the country."

--California Gov.
 Gray Davis,
 just prior to signing
 into law AB 25

YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS ARE NEEDED

We are enclosing an envelope for your TAX DEDUCTIBLE annual dues and/or a year end TAX DEDUCTIBLE donation to PFLAG.

Locally, we are an all volunteer organization so your donation goes a long way to help defray our expenses. We all share a common goal, and we need the support of our readers.

Thanking you in advance.
Joel Hendler & George Unger,
Co-Presidents PFLAG Los Angeles

DID YOU KNOW?

Almost 600,000 same-sex couples nationwide were identified by the 2000 Census, and same-sex couples were more than 1 out of every 178 households in the United States.

Berlin's Gay Mayor Wins Landslide Election

BERLIN, October 22, 2001 – Berlin's first openly gay mayor said on Sunday his landslide victory over the conservative party that long dominated the city government would send a signal to the world that the German capital is a tolerant city.

Klaus Wowereit became Germany's most famous homosexual in June when he outed himself in a spectacular manner just hours before a leading newspaper was about to reveal his secret.

It turned the little-known local leader into an instant celebrity – and did him no harm at the polls on Sunday. "I'm gay and that's a good thing," Wowereit said in June. The second part of his comment turned into a cult phrase.

"The signal from this election is that Berlin is a tolerant city, an international city, and it doesn't matter which skin color or religion or life orientation a person has," he said.

Wowereit, a lawyer who has only been in the city assembly since 1995, has been acting mayor since June following the collapse of the city's ruling coalition that he engineered. The SPD walked out on its CDU partners (Christian Democrats) over a banking scandal.

In a race that quickly turned ugly, CDU challenger Frank Steffel accused Wowereit of having a "deformed character." A senior CDU official, still smarting on Sunday, said Wowereit would lack credibility on many issues because he's gay.

Wowereit's ascent to power follows the victory of Bertrand Delanoe, one of France's few openly gay politicians, as Paris mayor in March. Delanoe led a united left slate to victory in the French capital where the right had held sway since 1871.

**Wednesday, October 17, 2001:
9 years ago today...**

...a worried 33 year-old surprised his Mom and Dad by coming home from NY to Albany unannounced. He was nervous, agitated, and was clearly hoping to catch his folks by themselves, for a chat. Instead, as usual, the house was filled with kids and dogs, family members and friends passing through, saying hello, and enjoying a crisp Fall Saturday.

Shortly after noon, when the crowd thinned out, the halting words came out, echoing in the kitchen where he had grown up. "Mom, Dad, I have something to tell you..."

When I came out to my Mom and Dad 9 years ago, I had prepared myself to lose them. I had a bag packed in my car, I was ready for the worst, despite 33 years of love and support. But they had loved their *straight* son, not their gay son, and I was afraid. On October 17th, 1992, I conquered my fear, and was rewarded with the same love and support I and my family had enjoyed through so many challenges over so many years.

With a simple hug, a three-way embrace through tears, I was reborn. And in many ways, so were they. So today, I celebrate the incredible power of love, and the awesome freedom of truth. As I look over emailed "anniversary greetings" from my siblings, a coming out anniversary card (!) from my Mom and Dad (as they send each year at this time), I look back on my coming out with joy and wonder. I love this day. But I ache for those whose memories of this signal event are not positive, but sad. I know how blessed I am to have parents and 3 sisters, one brother and a host of cousins and extended family that accept me for who I am, and love me unconditionally. Many are not so fortunate. For many, the ultimate expression of love and trust was met with anger, derision, rejection or worse.

Ultimately, coming out is an act of love. It is letting the truth out of the closet, to share with those we truly love. If love abides, then all will be well. Where fear predominates, fear triumphs. Where there is love, there is hope for a future of openness and freedom.

My mom and dad, and sisters, brother, sister-in-law and brothers-in-law are all advocates now for all of us, gay, lesbian, straight, HUMAN. Advocates for all that people are, and all that people can be. THAT is the greatest anniversary gift of all.

With love and a great big smile on MY day from Austin,
Steve

Steve Basile is the list owner/manager of PFLAG-TALK, a mailing list for people interested in PFLAG and related issues and people who love them, and PFLAG-ANNOUNCE, a moderated list for timely news and announcements about events from and for Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians and Gays, including trans-gendered people.

For information on subscribing to the lists, send email to: owner-pflag-announce@youth-guard.org (FOR PFLAG ANNOUNCE), and owner-pflag-talk@youth-guard.org (FOR PFLAG TALK) The PFLAG-Talk Web Page is at <http://www.critpath.org/pflag-talk/>

AT THE MOVIES

by Walter Lippmann
walterlx@earthlink.net



The bi-monthly schedule of our PFLAG newsletter means that many of the movies reviewed here are gone from the theaters unless they prove to be very successful at the box office.

It's a delight to report that **THE CLOSET**, the hilarious and pointed French comedy starring Daniel Auteuil, Thierry Lhermite, Gerard Depardieu, and Michele Laroque is still in theatrical release, four months following its opening! If you haven't had the pleasure of seeing this picture, try to do so as soon as you can.

COME UNDONE

("Presque Rien", which literally means "Almost Nothing") is a coming-of-age tale set in contemporary France. It's in French with English subtitles. It's already completed its time in the theaters and I was very favorably impressed. It tells the story of a teenage boy who discovers, in the course of a summer vacation with members of his family, that he is sexually drawn to men.

As the narrative begins, the protagonist has just unsuccessfully attempted suicide. The picture then takes us full circle to an understanding of why that was. The protagonist, and the young working class man he's drawn to and begins a relationship with, have their emotional ups and downs. The two young people have different orientations in both their emotional as well as their personal lives. These differences, not the homosexual orientation of the character central to the story, is the source of dramatic tension in the picture. Neither character has struggle, uncertainty or reluctance about his attraction to other men. It's how they deal with their other relationship issues and what they want to make of their connection which drives the picture.

What I found most striking, and at the same time most pleasing about this movie was the utter matter-of-factness with which most of its characters,

above all the parents, deal with their sons' attractions to men. Conflict over this is what typically drives coming-of-age stories about young gays and lesbians.

Here, the gayness is all but taken for granted and it's all the other relationship issues and challenges which are at the heart of the tale. This very matter-of-factness, which gives the viewer a momentary sense of what it would be like of the world didn't suffer from all of its homophobia, was what made the movie most affecting to this viewer.

SOBREVIVRE ("I Will Survive")

is also still in a limited theatrical release as these notes are being prepared. It's a Spanish movie with English subtitles. Described by reviews as a romantic comedy, the movie begins with a raft of first person observations of the many difficulties single people have today making romantic or intimate connections. These are given in an hysterically funny and utterly true-to-life manner. After about the first third of the story, it shifts mood and turns into a drama rooted in the conflicting needs of its central characters, a man and a woman who find themselves in a relationship which seems to be a happy one.

The narrative revolves around Marga, an unhappily-single, heterosexual thirty-something. After numerous unsuccessful dating stories, some of which are shared with the viewer, she meets the perfect guy. All is well and, nothing is wrong. They move in together, talk about marrying, and she gets pregnant. The guy is killed and in a few moments Marga finds that she is single again, a single mother now, and out of a job, all in the same short time span.

Marga soon lands a job in a video story where she meets another guy, and he also seems to be ideal in many ways, though there's an odd hesitancy

about him which isn't initially made clear.

If you can imagine a more effective, affecting, and ultimately more successful movie than Madonna and Rubert Everett's **THE NEXT BEST THING**, you've got an idea of what **SOBREVIVRE** is.

OUR LADY OF THE ASSASSINS

was given major feature presentations at both **OUTFEST** and the Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival this year. It's a beautiful, though very dark (emotionally) picture about a disillusioned writer who returns to his homeland, Columbia, to live out his final days. Columbia, as readers of the daily news know, is noted for being home to major drug dealers, as well as to revolutionary left-wing guerillas and right-wing paramilitary death squads. The United States is increasing its long-standing involvement in that country's civil war, so it's very useful to get a little sense of the country through the movie, which was shot there.

The protagonist returns to his homeland with the apparent aim of living out his final days. He seems a cultured individual, but why he is disillusioned isn't made clear, nor is it really the focus of the story. He meets a young man in whose arms he seems to find a reason for staying alive, though they appear to have little or nothing in common. The young man makes his living, or maybe simply survives, in the country's criminal underworld. The movie is filled with violent images in a location where the population seems divided into only two kinds of people: victims or predators. It's a very violent movie, yet somehow I found it didn't revel in that violence. The surprising dramatic twist which moves the picture to its conclusion was stunning once it came clearly into focus.

Until next time, "At The Movies".
Walter Lippmann

Do Unnatural Acts Cause Natural Disasters? (by Janis Walworth; July 16, 1998)

Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition, recently warned Orlando, Florida, that it was courting natural disaster by allowing gay pride flags to be flown along its streets. "A condition like this will bring about ... earthquakes, tornadoes, and possibly a meteor," he said, apparently referring to his belief that the presence of openly gay people incurs divine wrath and that God acts through geological and meteorological events to destroy municipalities that permit gay people the same civil liberties as others. (Robertson also warned Orlando about terrorist bombs, suggesting the possibility that God may also employ terrorists.)

Before Pat and his Christian cronies get too carried away promulgating the idea that natural disasters are prompted by people who displease God, they should take a hard look at the data. Take tornadoes. Every state (except Alaska) has them--some only one or two a year, dozens in others. Gay people are in every state (even Alaska). According to Pat's hypothesis, there should be more gay people in states that have more tornadoes. But are there? Nope. In fact, there's no correlation at all between the number of gay folks (as estimated by the number of gay political organizations, support groups, bookstores, radio programs, and circuit parties) and the annual tornado count ($r = .04$, $p = .78$ for you statisticians). So much for the "God hates gays" theory.

God seems almost neutral on the subject of sexual orientation. I say "almost" because if we look at the density of gay groups relative to the population as a whole, there is a small but statistically significant ($p < .05$) correlation with the occurrence of tornadoes. And it's a negative correlation ($r = -.28$). For those of you who haven't used statistics since 1973, that means that a high concentration of gay organizations actually protects against tornadoes. A state with the population of, say, Alabama could avert two tornadoes a year merely by doubling the number of gay organizations in the state. (Tough choice for Alabama's civil defense strategists.)

Although God may not care about sexual orientation, the same cannot be said for religious affiliation. If the underlying tenet of Pat's postulate is true--that God wipes out offensive folks via natural disasters--then perhaps we can find some evidence of who's on God's hit list. Jews are off the hook here: there's no correlation between numbers of Jews and frequency of tornadoes. Ditto for Catholics. But when it comes to Protestants, there's a highly significant correlation of .71. This means that fully half the state-to-state variation in tornado frequency can be accounted for by the presence of Protestants. And the chance that this association is merely coincidental is only one in 10,000.

Protestants, of course, come in many flavors--we were able to find statistics for Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, and Other. Lutherans don't seem to be a problem--no correlation with tornadoes. There's a modest correlation ($r = .52$, $p = .0001$) between Methodists and tornadoes. But Baptists and Others share the prize: both groups show a definite correlation with tornado frequency ($r = .68$, $p = .0001$). This means that Texas could cut its average of 139 tornadoes per year in half by sending a few hundred thousand Baptists elsewhere (Alaska maybe?).

What, you are probably asking yourself, about gay Protestants? An examination of the numbers of gay religious groups (mostly Protestant) reveals no significant relationship with tornadoes. Perhaps even Protestants are less repugnant to God if they're gay. And that brings up another point--the futility of trying to save the world by getting gay people to accept Jesus. It looks from our numbers like the frequency of natural disasters could be more effectively reduced by encouraging Protestants to be gay.

Gay people have been falsely blamed for disasters ever since Sodom was destroyed by fire and brimstone (we have been unable to find any statistics on disasters involving brimstone). According to a reliable source, the destruction of Sodom was indeed an act of God (see Genesis 19:13) and was perpetrated because the citizens thereof were, according to the same source (see Ezekiel 16:49-50), "arrogant, overfed and unconcerned [and] did not help the poor and needy"--not because they were gay. Now Pat would have us believe that gays are the cause of tornadoes (as well as earthquakes, meteors, and even terrorist bombs) in utter disregard for evidence showing that Baptists are much more likely to cause them.

I say "Kudos!" to Orlando. Despite Robertson's warning that Orlando is "right in the way of some serious hurricanes" (hardly a revelation), note that it was not struck by the very destructive Hurricane Andrew a few years ago. And amid the recent conflagrations (that's fires) in central Florida, which occurred just after Pat sounded his alarm, Orlando was spared. Keep those flags waving!

As any statistician will tell you, of course, correlation doesn't prove causation. Protestants causing tornadoes by angering God isn't the only explanation for these data. It could be that Baptists and Other Protestants purposely flock to states that have lots of tornadoes (no, we haven't checked for a correlation between IQ and religious affiliation). But if Pat and his Christian crew insist that natural disasters are brought on by people who offend God, let the data show who those people are.