

# Grapevine

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE LESBIAN MOTHERS' DEFENCE FUND  
TORONTO, CALGARY, VANCOUVER, CANADA

FALL 1981

## Two Breakthroughs Conferences in Vancouver and South America

VANCOUVER, May 16-18 -- 500 women gathered here at the 1981 National Lesbian Conference for concerts, dances, a march -- a lesbian march through downtown Vancouver! -- and dozens of workshops on topics ranging from Mothering & Child Custody to Lesbians of Color, to Sexuality.

The most important difference between this event and previous lesbian conferences in Canada was the number of mothers and children in attendance. Organizer Dorothy Kidd estimated that between 1/5 and 1/4 of the women were mothers!

One reason so many felt welcome this time was that a lot of thought had been given to providing good child care. The set-up worked smoothly most of the time, allowing mothers the freedom to concentrate on their own interests.

There were also special workshops for the children, and some came to regular adult sessions to put in their two cents-worth along with everyone else. In one of the many meetings on custody and child-raising in lesbian families, a pre-teenaged girl spoke about how she decides whether or not to tell her friends about her mother, and how she handles a negative reaction: "If they can't see that Mom is still the person they liked before they knew, I'll be hurt, but I'll know they're not the kind of people I need for friends." She said, too, that she doesn't feel she has to tell everyone, and that most of those she's chosen to trust have responded pretty well.

Helen from the LMDF here, Adrienne from the Lesbian Mothers' National Defense Fund in Seattle WA, and I led a counselling and information session on custody that drew more than a dozen mothers facing possible custody struggles or uncertain of their legal security. We were able to offer advice and written resources, and also drafted a resolution later adopted by the conference asking that everyone send the names of sympathetic, expert lawyers to us so that we can compile a central referral list.

Two new LMDF's -- in Calgary and Vancouver -- were "conceived" at the conference! (See Birth Announcements) From now on the *Grapevine* will include news from all three Canadian LMDF's.

Finally, the Vancouver Conference felt like a new stage in the maturation of the lesbian movement. The presence of mothers and children was felt all the time and helped everyone concentrate on the daily realities (concrete problems *and* victories) of our lives as lesbians. There were also plenty of discussions of theory and strategies for change, but these too were grounded in a new, more inclusive sense of who we are and what freedoms we want, for ourselves and our children.

BOGOTA, COLOMBIA, July 18-21 -- I was one of half a dozen international observers (from North America and Europe) who attended the First Latin American and Caribbean women's Conference, along with 250 women from all parts of South America.



*Francie Wyland (2nd from left) and delegates from the Dominican Republic*

Life for lesbians there is very difficult and dangerous. The penalties for being known as a lesbian range from loss of family support and children, to police-administered beatings and imprisonment for "an offense to public morality." Women who want to live independently from parents and men must work hard to find and keep jobs they can lose in an instant if discovered.

For all these reasons, and because Latin America is the birth-place and a strong-hold of "machismo", the lesbians at the conference faced a challenge in simply finding each other, much less speaking

*continued on page 2*

*The Lesbian Mothers' Defence Fund was set up almost four years ago to provide a permanent resource for mothers who are fighting for child custody. We can offer:*

- \* Pre-legal advice and info on successful cases
- \* Referrals to sympathetic, expert lawyers
- \* Financial help in building a strong court case
- \* Personal and emotional support

## Bogotá (con't)

out as gay women. The straight women, who are fighting too for their own autonomy from men, were extremely curious about lesbianism as a life-style and as a form of struggle against forced heterosexuality.

But lesbianism was nowhere on the agenda: too risky, too explosive, too few lesbians who could propose such a discussion ... To some degree, the official silence was due to overt opposition from a minority of women at the conference who belong to leftist political organizations such as the Communist Party. They considered lesbianism a "personal" and perhaps decadent matter, not important enough for general discussion.

The news from Bogota is that the lesbians *did* organize together despite all these obstacles, and the upshot was a huge, boisterous unscheduled workshop on lesbianism on the next to last day of the event.

Because I was an outsider I could be open about myself as a representative of the LMDF. So, from the very beginning of the conference when I started distributing copies of the *Grapevine*, I became a focus for all the urgent interest the lesbians felt about the movement here, and all the questions the straight women had been dying to ask any lesbian at all.

The other lesbians could find me and, through me, each other, in safety. We met in small groups between and after sessions to interview each other. There were revelations of personal histories, and some told of their struggles for legitimacy within the gay and women's organizations that have formed in the last few years. We strategized together informally about what we could do to make these discussions surface at the conference.



*A music break between sessions*

At lunchtime on the third day, after checking with the other gay women, I approached the conference organizers to ask if there was a free room where we could hold a discussion session on lesbianism for all those who had been asking for information. They agreed, and announced that it would start in half an hour.

The lesbians came in first, in some fear, and we sat waiting to see who else would come. We expected twenty or so. In a moment the room was full to overflowing. Two hundred of the 250 women at the conference came in and, lining the back and sides of the room, abandoned their work in other meetings for the rest of the day!

The atmosphere was indescribably exuberant. One

after another they poured out their questions and stories. While not identifying themselves as lesbians (most had husbands or boyfriends) many of them made it clear that they were no strangers to the experience of attraction to women. They spoke about a lack of intimacy in their relationships with men -- even if they're in love with them -- and how dangerous it is in South America to be altogether unconnected from men; about how difficult it is to have a love life of any sort when you're raising children and holding down a job; and about their debt to lesbians for opening up the discussion of sexual freedom as an indispensable ingredient for social change.

Afterwards everyone -- lesbian and straight -- felt that the session marked a turning point. And from a North American perspective I had the same sense. If lesbians in South America are beginning to emerge and forge alliances with other women who have their own stake in the fight for women's autonomy, then we can be sure the same thing is happening everywhere in the world. I think Bogota signals a new level of strength for all of us.

*Francie Wyland  
Toronto*

## New Beginnings! Calgary...

Calgary -- We are pleased to announce the formation of the LMDF for Alberta. We will be serving the needs of womyn from all over Alberta from our Calgary office. In Calgary we have had a local support group for some time now. It consists of lesbian mothers, their lovers and anyone interested in the group. We have a lot of womyn with varied backgrounds in the group but find that we have a lot of common interests.

Some of the topics we discuss are such things as coming out to your children, how our lovers get along with our children and vice versa, and how we can support each other to make motherhood a little easier for everyone. We usually bring our children to the meetings so that if they want to talk about it amongst themselves they can. One of the practical things that the group does is to barter amongst ourselves for child care so that we can all get a break at times as well.

In 1975 the first successful custody case involving a Canadian lesbian mother was fought in an Alberta court. This set an important precedent for our province. Here lesbianism per se is not grounds for losing custody of your children. The LMDF informs womyn of their legal rights as well as providing information on how to avoid a custody battle in court. We are still further ahead if we don't have to fight an expensive risky court case. If, however, a womyn does have to go to court to fight for custody of her children, we can provide referrals to a lawyer and can also provide expert witnesses such as psychologists.

We've found that if we support each other we are stronger and that if a womyn knows her legal rights and has some support that she is stronger and better able to deal with the harassment that she often has to face. Fathers fight for custody of their children for many reasons but not always because they feel that they are the better parent. Too often womyn and children are subjected to much pain because of the behavior of the father. Many men are very threatened by the fact that 'their' womyn has left them, especially if it is for another womyn. With the support

of womyn in the same situation it is easier to stand up for our rights as parents.

We would like to hear from people who need our services and also from those who would like to meet some other womyn in similar situations in our support group. We are also seeking volunteers to work with womyn who need the services of the LMDF, in every part of the province. In Calgary we meet the 1st and 3rd Wednesday of every month from 7 to 9. We also have pot luck suppers from time to time.

Child care can be arranged with prior notice if necessary. Please call Lynn or Vicky at (403) 265-6328 for more information or call the Lesbian Information Line at (403) 265-9458 Wednesdays between 7 and 9.

*Vicky Hartford and Lynn Fraser  
For the Alberta LMDF*

## Vancouver...

We are just getting started with our Lesbian Mother's Defence Fund in Vancouver. Our collective varies in size from a low of 2 to a high of 10 members.

To date we have gathered together some of the resource materials available through the Seattle defence fund. In the last week we have obtained a post office box number and will now be able to do mailouts to establish contact with a number of lawyers and expert witnesses whose names we have received from various sources.

We will also be doing mailouts to various lesbian/gay/feminist groups to let them know who we are and hopefully gain their support. We have joined the BC Federation of Women which gives us access to the more than 50 other member groups. To aid in the recognizing of our group we have a banner (see photo) to carry in demonstrations and use at different events. Through these and other means we are becoming known in the community.



Money is a problem (all donations will be very gratefully accepted). Presently we are organizing an arts and crafts show to raise money for the group. The generosity of artists and craftswomen has been tremendous! It will take place at the Vancouver Status of Women offices on November 29th.

Although things seem to happen at a snails pace at times, we're continuing onwards with the time and energy available to us. Any lesbians who wish to join our collective can attend a pot luck lunch which we hold on the last Sunday of each month.

For more information about us or if you have information for us we can be reached at: VLMDF

PO Box 65563  
Station F  
Vancouver, BC

Or call Mary at (604) 251-5034

## The Lesbian Family - a progress report

Some women dream of Mom, Dad and the kids -- the typical nuclear family. Others imagine two or more strong, independent, loving women and the kids. The path leading to the first is clearly defined and directed by tradition. The trail leading to the lesbian family is circuitous and barely discernable ... but it does exist. Progress toward recognition of our existence can be seen in news items like these:

Governor Edmund Brown has appointed Mary Carolyn Morgan, 35, a San Francisco lawyer, as California's first avowedly lesbian judge. (*Globe and Mail, August 28, 1981*)

A public hospital in Melbourne, Australia has refused to provide artificial insemination to lesbians, who they feel must be considered in the same category as other single women. But the Queen Victoria Hospital in Melbourne, which is privately funded, has provided AI for lesbians. (*Gay Community News, October 31, 1981*)

Two or more persons living together who are not related are now officially considered family for the purposes of public housing in Detroit, Michigan. (*GCN*) and from Canada:

Charlotte Rochon, a member of CUPE local 3012 in Saskatoon has been awarded "parental leave" to share in the first weeks' care of her partner Maxine's new son Daniel. CUPE 3012 has changed its contract to include "parental" rather than paternity leave. Recognizing the important precedent set, SORWUC local 3 (OXFAM) is similarly changing its contract to allow for parental and maternity leave. (*Kinesis, May '81*)

But as we experiment with defining and realizing our concept of the "ideal family" we continue to be threatened by myths and external pressures.

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In the Fall 1980 *Grapevine* we were happy to report that Rosemary Dempsey, New Jersey, was awarded custody of her two children. This year Rosemary's lover Margaret Wales, a lesbian activist, attempted to gain sole custody of her daughters Amy, 11 and Jennifer, 9.

Wales's husband, Stanley Zilberzweig, carried on a two-pronged campaign -- to persuade the judge that Wales's lesbianism makes her an inadequate parent,

*continued on following page*

## FAMILY (Con't)

and to frighten his daughters into choosing to live with him. These are some of the things he and his friends told the girls and the court:

*"If you love your mother more than your father you are going to be a lesbian."*

*Wales and Dempsey "make love in front of the children acting like animals."*

*"You don't like your school. You are growing up disadvantaged where you live." (e.g. in an integrated neighborhood)*

*"A lesbian mother may molest her daughters."*

*"Your mother doesn't really love you. She just works for the lesbian movement."*

After listening to this diatribe Judge Daniel Coburn heard a mass of evidence disproving the allegations, and finally concluded, sanely, that "the fact that Margaret Wales is a lesbian has as much to do with this case as the fact that she's Jewish." But the terms of the settlement he imposed, while officially called joint custody, are that the girls live with their father except for 3 out of 4 weekends, half the school holidays and all of July.

Kay Williams, one of the lawyers involved on Wales's behalf, later said she felt Wales was coerced into accepting these terms. In April, after ten weeks of testimony, the judge warned that if they wouldn't agree to joint custody he would award sole custody to the father and word his decision in such a way as to preclude any appeal.

She added that "from a legal standpoint the settlement is not damaging to lesbians, because the judge has allowed a lesbian living with a lover and active in the movement to maintain (partial) custody."

*Lynda  
Toronto*

*(The information about Margaret Wales's case is from an article by Jill Clark in Gay Community News, July 11, 1981)*

## More Custody News

In this issue we have bad news from the "bible belt;" three cases involving lesbian mothers living in Tennessee:

Kathleen Park, from Memphis, was awarded visitation rights in 1977. The conditions were that she could see her three children, Michael 10, Brian 7, and five-year-old Christine, every other weekend, on alternate school holidays and for one month each summer. She has not seen her children for over 3 months now. Her ex-husband has been violating the court order.

"I would arrive for a scheduled visit and he would have taken them off for the day somewhere ... He's scared me all these past years about my being a lesbian. He's said, 'If you don't do as I tell you, you won't ever see the kids again.'"

Kathleen's children want to be with their mother, particularly Michael. "My oldest, little Mike, is just biding his time until he gets to be with me. There wasn't a day when I went out there that he didn't say that he wished he could come live with me." She goes to court November 13th, to challenge her husband's violation of the visitation order.

*(GCN, October 17, 1981)*

In Gallatin TN, Judge Thomas Boyers presided over a custody settlement removing four children -- aged one and a half to twelve -- from their mother "Mary Moe" "solely on the grounds of her lesbianism," according to her lawyer Abby Rubinfeld. The husband's petition consisted only of the allegation of lesbianism, which he substantiated by presenting an affidavit signed by Mary's ex-lover.

Mary decided not to pursue a full hearing. She felt the children preferred living with their father, "because he has more money and they don't have to do any chores." She had been married fifteen years and had no income for a while after the divorce.

She was granted visiting rights, at her husband's home, but since the settlement last spring, has not been allowed to exercise them. Her husband has moved 150 miles away and aimed a gun at her the last time she approached the house.

Mary has filed a petition asking Boyers to set different visitation restrictions and to warn her husband not to interfere with the court's orders.

*(GCN, May 16, 1981)*

Last March, Bradley County TN Circuit Judge Earle Murphy held that lesbianism per se is not a sufficient basis upon which to remove children from their mother's care. But he then ordered "Jane Jones" to give up custody of her son, 4, a victim of cerebral palsy.

She had recently moved from a small town to Nashville, which has schools designed to meet the special needs of disabled children. Judge Murphy, however, based his decision on his own feeling -- unsupported by evidence -- that the boy would suffer in Nashville from separation from his extended family.

The father testified that he doesn't want his son brought up in an "immoral atmosphere." He plans to place the boy in a Christian private school with no other disabled children. The son was making progress in Nashville. Now back in Cleveland, he is doing badly and wants to come back to his mother.

The case will be taken to appellate court in Knoxville later this fall.

*(GCN, May 16, 1981)*



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# COMING OUT POOR

I need to do some coming out in the lesbian community. I need to come out as a welfare mother. Most of my friends and political allies know that I am a lesbian, that I mother a boy child, that I was a student until last spring and that I am unemployed.

But there are many friends who have never been to my apartment in subsidized housing. I haven't come out to them as a welfare mother. I'm embarrassed by the filth in the halls and elevators, by the graffiti, by the row of women and children sitting in the lobby because they have nothing better to do, and because they can't stand to stay in their apartments one more minute. Living in my \$97/month apartment is the only way I survive on mothers' allowance, but it embarrasses me. I have a couple of these strange, one-sided friendships in which I'm always at her house and she's never at mine.

When I do invite someone over, I always bring her, so I can talk and explain as we ride the elevator up to my home. "The apartments are nice inside. It's just that no one cares about the halls." But in my apartment, too, I'm afraid people will find the furniture tasteless. I don't have enough money to replace the things I bought years ago as a 19-year-old bride.



There's some anger in my coming out; I'm fighting the assumption that mothers are not political. That we don't care to get involved.

Every meeting costs two bus tickets and \$5 for a babysitter. The latest feminist film or women's concert that everyone "simply has to see" breaks my budget for a month. Lots of lesbians have very little money, but for me deciding to go to a concert doesn't mean rearranging my priorities, it means not paying the phone bill or eating spaghetti and macaroni more the next week than is good for me or my son.

Some meetings also mean guilt for me. The little boy that my friends think is so cute, pipes up with "Are you going to another meeting, Mom? Can I come? Do I have to go to the sitter's?" Not always of course, but often enough.

Lesbian mothers, especially the poor ones, need some recognition of the problems we face. We very often can't afford to be as out as we'd like. Some judges will say that we can love women just as long as we don't flaunt it by going to meetings or demonstrations.

It really isn't that we don't care. So often it is simply too difficult, in so many ways, for us to be a regular member of a committee, or a frequently-seen face at events in the lesbian community.

Every coming out also has joy, celebration and hope. I am glad that I now feel strong enough to tell and to show some people that I am a lesbian welfare mother. I can foresee some nice times at my place with friends, finally reciprocating all those visits, and not having to pay a sitter, to boot.

I hope that the lesbian community starts to understand the special problems of mothers, and more than that, offers real help in solving some of them. Many mothers are less involved and less out than they want to be because of the fear of custody hassles, the costs of child care, and the actual time involved in mothering.

But places must be made for us to contribute to the advancement of the lesbian movement in whatever way we are able. After all, what's more political than survival? Who is more revolutionary than those who live in the lifestyle they choose in defiance of patriarchal custom? We want to love women and keep our children too

Helen  
Toronto

## Lesbimom

Lesbimom, with her lover Vicky  
Lesbimom, with her son named Dustin  
Iron in her thighs  
Softness in her eyes  
With more strength than one  
She's a Super Mom  
It's the mighty -- Lesbimom!!!

by Dustin, 11  
Calgary

## The Family Benefits Work Group

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3rd Annual

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General Family Benefits Speakout

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Bring your problems and concerns. Free daycare will be provided.

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For more information call 924-4646 between 10am and 3pm Tuesday-Friday, or 534-4947 til 10pm.

# Raising the Issues

Members of the Lesbian and Feminist Mothers' Political Action Group have just finished writing a book. It contains four papers.

In *Child Sharing: A Feminist Issue*, Mary Wallace speaks of her negative experiences as a mother taking part in the feminist movement. She speaks of the isolation, poverty, and exhaustion often experienced by single mothers, and of the lack of understanding and concrete support from non-mothering feminists. She is particularly concerned about the isolation of the children of feminists, who grow up in a feminist community that does not recognize their needs, and in a larger society that does not share the values they are taught at home. She suggests ways that feminist groups and individuals could evolve a community support system for children.



In her long paper, *Children and Feminism*, Lee MacKay argues that because the oppression of women and the oppression of children are interdependent systems, feminists must work for children's as well as women's liberation. As long as nurturing work is separated from other sorts of work and done by women in the context of a private family, neither women nor children will gain freedom. Therefore, within the feminist movement we must stop perceiving children as the private property and responsibility of their parents, and develop communal ways of caring for them. In our society, the public school and the private family are the two primary institutions through which children are oppressed. Feminists must actively support all children's right to choose the adult care-takers with whom they will live, and to choose by whom they will be taught. The bulk of the paper consists of concrete suggestions for how we could act on these ideas.



In her *Child Care Report*, Dorrie Nagler describes the practical details of setting up adequate child care for feminist events, and analyses the political importance of providing good child care. She stresses that providing good feminist child care must be a group responsibility. It must not be perceived as a service, incidental to the main event, and its organization must not be left in the hands of an individual or a small group of 'child care specialists.'

In *Lesbian Mothers*, Mary Wallace describes the suffering homophobia causes lesbian mothers and their children. If we hide our lesbianism from our children, they sense that we lie to them and do not trust them. If we are 'out' to them, they are burdened with the knowledge of a society so frighteningly hostile to the 'sickness' and 'evil' of lesbianism that it forces children to live apart from mothers they love.

These four papers constitute about two hundred and fifty pages of discussion and analysis. We think it is urgent that all committed feminists -- not just those who are currently mothering -- begin to examine and take action on the issues that we are raising. If you would like to read our book, write to us care of Octopus Books, 1146 Commercial St., Vancouver BC. We don't know yet exactly how we will get it printed and what it will cost. Ideas for printing and distributing it will be gratefully received.

Lee MacKay  
for LAFMPAG

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## Help Save Our Family

Dear friends,

I am backed against the wall. The knowing fear that many lesbian mothers face is becoming a reality for us. Mark and David's father has petitioned for custody. Wendy and I are in an impossible position to fight this financially. We are both students trying to make it on school grants and loans.

This September I petitioned my ex-husband in regard to non-payment of children's medical bills, an increase in child support payments and a more equitable visitation arrangement. At that time I thought that Craig would not be interested in custody and he had also assured me that my lesbianism would never be used against me.

Craig and his lawyer have counter-petitioned, asking for custody. The grounds stated are that the children, now approaching puberty, should have a full-time male influence, that I am not using the support money for the children, and that they should not be growing up in a lesbian household.

Mark and David are happy here. They have told their father they want to stay. Their father has often been abusive to them. He has consistently shown his lack of respect and concern for them. The boys are doing well here - in school, in sports and in the community. They are vocal in their support of the rights of gays. I am very proud of my children.

We need help financially. In Genessee County it is believed expert testimony is very important to the court, which is still ignorant about these issues. We want an expert witness - a psychiatrist who will present an unbiased view of our life-style, and its effects on the children. This will cost us \$1500.

Please help by contributing whatever you can afford. Cheques should be made out to the "Help Save Our Family Fund", c/o Empty Closet, 73 Monroe Avenue, Rochester NY 14620.

If a settlement is reached before going to trial, and/or there is money left in the fund, your pro-rated share will be returned to you.

Thank you.

Sincerely,  
Kathy Allgood  
Bergen, NY

## Tips from a US Lawyer

Custody threats can come from parents, grandparents, social workers, or neighbors, as well as from husbands, and can be directed at women who are separated, divorced, or never married. However, the married woman still or recently living with her husband is especially vulnerable and usually the least prepared to protect herself. Although each case is different, there are similarities which allow me to make some suggestions to the mother who is in a loving relationship with another woman and is vulnerable to a custody threat. This advice is general and may not apply to all in a given case.

-If you are in a marriage with children, living with your husband, and in an intimate relationship with another woman, you should be very cautious about discussing that relationship with your husband, regardless of how close you have been in the past or how progressive he is on other social issues.

-Consult a lawyer before the issue has been raised to prepare yourself for the possibilities in your province.

-Don't leave the family home. Once you leave the home, you can be accused of abandonment and it is very difficult to regain the home, whether the children are in it or not.

-Don't leave your children for a vacation or even for weekends away.

-Consult a psychologist or psychiatrist who is qualified to evaluate children, who is experienced with healthy homosexual parenting, and who can see your children for a long enough period to offer a recommendation if there is a legal challenge. Advanced professional degrees are necessary for establishing credibility with the judge.

-After you have established legal separation, agree to a formal visitation schedule with the father of the children (assuming this is an appropriate arrangement for the children) even before it is court ordered, and honor his visitation conscientiously. You want to protect yourself from later accusations that you dislike all men, want to deprive your children of men in their lives, want to alienate them from their father, etc.

-From the time you begin the separation process until custody is legally resolved and the divorce is final, live the realization that you may be followed by private investigators, that your home or phone may be "bugged", that your social activities with friends may be photographed. Try to find a balance between grasping these possibilities and living your life normally. In many ways, though, this is not a normal time.

-While you are vulnerable to a custody challenge, don't choose to live with another woman as a lover/partner unless you are willing to open this relationship to the scrutiny of attorneys, social workers, psychiatrists, depositions, and court-sworn testimony.

-Finally, try to find some support group of friends or other lesbian mothers during this period because emotionally it is a very difficult time.

-Remember this: *You aren't crazy.* All of us who have been in your position felt many of the same things you are feeling, and we thought we were crazy a lot of the time.

by Barbara Price  
(condensed from Mom's Apple Pie, Newsletter of the Lesbian Mothers' National Defense Fund, PO Box 21567, Seattle WA 98111 USA. Tel (206) 325-2643. Summer/Fall issue.)

## Toronto Area Gays (TAG)

TAG is a collective of concerned lesbians and gay men who are conducting:

- \* Telephone counselling and information for lesbians and gay men  
—Monday-Saturday 7PM-10:30PM
- \* Monthly discussion groups
- \* A weekly lesbian support and awareness group
- \* A weekly gay men's coming-out group

Call us ... (416) 964-6600

