

Grapevine

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE LESBIAN MOTHERS' DEFENCE FUND • SUMMER 1979

Breaking the Silence Barrier

Here it is! The first issue of "Grapevine"! It's written by women from the Lesbian Mothers' Defence Fund -- mothers, single women and children -- and we hope to publish three times a year.

The LMDF was set up a year ago by gay women from the Wages for Housework campaign, to provide a permanent resource for mothers who are fighting for child custody.

We can offer:

- ** Pre-legal advice, and information on successful battles in Canada, the United States and England
- ** Referrals to sympathetic lawyers and other professionals
- ** Financial assistance in building a strong court case
- ** Personal and emotional support

Our aims are:

- ** To help gay women keep or win custody of their children
- ** To promote the rights of lesbian mothers and all gay women through media interviews, political lobbying and regular contact with women's and community groups
- ** To mobilize support for all lesbian mothers' struggle against discrimination and economic hardship
- ** To speak out about how many thousands of lesbian mothers there are, while putting no pressure on any individual woman to make her name public



Already we've grown into a solid network in southern Ontario, and we're getting calls and letters from all over Canada. Our sister organizations include the Lesbian Mothers' National Defense Fund in Seattle, Washington; Dykes and Tykes in New York; CALM in Philadelphia; and Wages Due Lesbians in England who monitor cases there.

Our newsletter is to spread the good news about gay mothers winning custody more and more often. "Grapevine" is a place for writing about our day-to-day lives, too, so lesbian mothers won't feel alone any more, and other women can see the common ground we all stand on in fighting for a better life for ourselves and our children.

Francie Wyland co-ordinates the Lesbian Mothers' Defence Fund on a full-time basis. She's the author of *Motherhood, Lesbianism and Child Custody*, which has been widely distributed in Canada, the USA and England and is presently being translated for publication in Italy. Francie is a frequent speaker at conferences and in the media on the subject of lesbian rights and child custody.

Many other women -- mothers and "non" -- are pooling our spare time and energy to build the LMDF and publish "Grapevine". We'd like you to join us for an afternoon every month, or an hour a week. Call us, or write. We'll print your letters, poems, stories and drawings. Send us your donations, and circulate the good news!

Local News

In every issue we'll let you know about the victories of gay mothers here and internationally. While we're still fighting against odds, we're winning more and more. This is important news, even though we won't be using women's names, or too many details about their cases:

** Catherine, a Toronto school teacher, has won temporary custody of her 6-year old daughter. While her husband may continue to fight it out in court, Catherine has a good chance of winning because 1) she has a good, steady job, and 2) she has a very "low profile" as a lesbian. (The courts tend to weight these factors heavily in their evaluation of which parent can provide the "better" home.)

** The husband of a London, Ontario woman dropped his suit for custody when his wife, Sally, presented him with evidence that courts in North America don't consider lesbians automatically "unfit" mothers any more. Sally's information came from the LMDF library of transcripts, expert testimony and judges' decisions.

International News -- In January '79 Margareth Miller won custody of her daughter in a unanimous decision by the Michigan Supreme Court, over-ruling decisions by two lower courts. In announcing their verdict the Court stated that a parent's homosexuality should not be viewed as a negative factor in a custody case, unless it has first been "proven" to be detrimental to the child(ren). This is a victory that's sure to be felt in Canadian courts, too! *news courtesy of the LMNDF, Seattle, Wash.*

What do you tell the kids?

At our first pot-luck get-together Helen told us about her 8-year-old daughter Linda's announcement at school that her mother was a lesbian...

Debora: Didn't you worry about Linda coming under a lot of fire from the other kids? Aren't you afraid of the reactions she's bound to get?

Helen: No. She can take care of herself at school, and besides, she's really proud of me.

Debora: I don't know. My son -- he's 15 -- he doesn't know about me being gay. Or I guess I should say I haven't told him. He and Pam's daughter -- she's 9 -- and Pam and I live together. The kids know we share a bed, but I've never sat him down and said, "I'm gay". I don't see why I should. Straight mothers don't confront their kids all of a sudden and say, "There's something you should know; I'm heterosexual". Why should I? It should just be part of everything else. It burns me up a lot when people I know tell me I "have" to tell him, or "should" tell him.

Frieda: Haven't the kids asked? When you hold hands with Pam or call each other "dearie" and stuff?

Pam: We're really careful about all that. When we're all watching TV Debora and I get to sit together because her son grabs the best chair and he doesn't give a thought to where the rest of us end up! But we've decided our bedroom is the only place in the house where we'll be close. We never kiss or hold hands or anything when the kids are around.

Melinda: With my kids I never had a choice about telling them. When I left my husband I had to leave the kids with him; I didn't have any money, I didn't know what my rights were, and he threatened that I'd never see them again if I went near a lawyer. So I didn't. And he told the kids at first that I was sick. Then he told them I was gay, and all kinds of lies about what that meant. So, when I got to take them out every two or three weeks, I'd explain, "Yes, it's true what your father is saying about me and Frieda, but it's not true that I wear men's clothes and we don't have crew-cuts, see?"

And so it was out in the open from the time they were little, and when I finally won them back four years later, they knew what our life was like. We aren't "out" to our neighbors, and Jim hasn't told his friends.

Debora: How do you explain when your friends come up to visit?

Jim: I just introduce them to Mom, and I say Frieda is my mom's friend.

Melinda: Anyway, I don't know whether I would have told them right away if their dad hadn't done it first...

Debora: It worries me, because my son has a lot of trouble expressing his needs. He's not very open about telling me what's bothering him. Maybe he needs to know and can't ask?

Francie: It seems to me it's got to be the mother's decision to tell or not, not pressure from the gay community or anyone else, since it's the mother who knows the kids best.

Debora: But I wish I felt a lot more confident than I do. I don't know what's on his mind or how to deal with it these days.

Melinda: Join the club! We all just do the best we can. Maybe your son would like to get together with Jim sometime? Kids do talk to each other.

Debora: Maybe. I guess I'll just play it by ear for now.

*This ain't so much a love poem
As a promo...*

*Who does all the housework
Late into the night
Who moves like Donna Summer
Shaking out of sight
Who sings like Billie Holliday
Belting all her might*

*You don't, and
You don't want to,
And that's all right.*

D.K.

Dear Anita...

Mrs. X, a lesbian mother who recently won custody of her two children, gave this speech at the rally to Stop Anita Bryant's crusade, Toronto, Jan. 14, 1978. She spoke anonymously, in disguise, to an audience of 1000 people.

I am here to speak as a lesbian mother. This hood is necessary because of the harassment my children would receive if my identity were known. Also the authorities would feel that I was flaunting my lesbianism and causing undue mental stress to my children.

When I left my husband I was forced to leave my children also. I was told that if I made any attempt to seek custody that I could be prevented from ever seeing them again. At that time I knew nothing of my rights or of the gay life. I know better now. I recently obtained full legal custody.

We want the right to earn a living, to living accommodations, to walk down the street as decent citizens, to send our children to school without them being tormented and teased if it became known that they had a homosexual parent.

We are not child molesters. We do not seduce children. We do not want any child seduced or molested by anyone.

What we do want is the right to raise our children, to choose our own sexual preference and the right of our children to choose theirs.

People say O.K. you can do those things now as long as you don't flaunt it. We are not asking for the right to take off our clothes and make love on Yonge St. We want to be able to say in a nice way to our employer when pressure is put on to attend social functions that we are gay and feel that we cannot attend, without fear of losing our jobs or when looking for living accommodations to simply say we are lesbians, instead of trying to answer endless questions like: "No husband? No boyfriend? Are you sisters?" Or, when taking out insurance through work to name my girlfriend as beneficiary without again answering endless questions.

I am appealing to Anita Bryant as a mother to end this crusade against us. To be a lesbian mother is heartbreaking. Today you have them, tomorrow you may not, solely because of who you love. That to me is unjust and unchristian. These problems are not of our own making as they would have us believe but because of the prejudice society has created against us.

May God forgive Anita Bryant for her persecution of us.

MOTHERHOOD LESBIANISM and CHILD CUSTODY



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Pot Luck Suppers

The Lesbian Mothers' Defence Fund gets together every 4-6 weeks for a pot-luck supper. We're mothers, girlfriends, kids, lawyers & friends. We'd like to invite you to join us for great food and company! Find out how we can all help each other.

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The Girlfriend's View

I have a lot of mixed feelings about living with a lesbian mother and her child. I am not sure how to go about putting my feelings down. I certainly do not want to say anything to hurt my girlfriend or her son. When Melinda and I moved in together she did not have her son, and we never really expected to get him. We thought when he was older and on his own, he would come and visit us, and if he did not know about us already, being older he would understand better when we told him. But, due to circumstances which I will not go into because it would take too long, Jim came to live with us. We had been together four years, so there were a lot of changes in my life.

I am not going to talk for Melinda or Jim, but for myself and my own emotions in this situation. First, I would like to say I like kids. I have fun playing and talking with them. I do try to listen to them and understand them. Before you think I am going to make myself out to be a saint, guess again, because having fun and playing with them and talking to them is as far as it goes. I am not a parent! Nor did I ever want to be a parent. It is the way I am and I'll always be that way. I do not want the responsibility and care of being a parent, and I am not apologizing for it nor defending myself, as some people I have met feel I should.

When Jim first came to live with us, I was given all this advice about how he would need this and that, and I was going to resent the time his mother was going to give him, and I was going to resent having to give up my privacy and the things I'd have to do without for him, and I'd have to change my ways, or else! And frankly, I wish they had minded their damn business and kept their faces shut and I would have found out soon enough what was in store for me!

One thing I did wrong was to act like the one thing in the world I am not -- a parent -- which is what everyone insisted I was, or said I should act like. Anyway, I did it and Jim resented me for it. (Funny how no one said he would resent me, or that he would be expected to change. Everything was, "Oh, he'll learn in due time", or, "Why should he have

to? He's only a kid.") I acted like a parent, and he did not need another mother or father. He already had both. Plus, our being gay was hard for him.

Melinda and I have different ideas about raising kids. I am much stricter than she is. It was a mess, and we fought like hell all the time and Jim was playing us off against one another, as they tell me kids will do. We talked, and decided we'd better do something, or we would break up. I stopped being a parent, and tried being a friend, instead, just letting him know I was there if his mother was busy and he wanted to talk. If he didn't, that was all right, too.

I do not like my privacy invaded; therefore I do not invade his. I do not like my things touched or taken without my permission; therefore I do not touch or take his things without asking him. When I have something to say I want him to listen; therefore I try to listen to him. I try to be honest with him, and if he wants to be honest with me he can be.

All I want from him is that he remember that I will always (so says his mother) be around. And that I not only pay my share, but also do my share, and therefore I have rights!

To be continued in our next issue

Frieda M.

I still don't believe it but we won our court case. It was scary and I was afraid but my brother and I spoke to the Judge and he told us about his family too. After that mommy and daddy had to go back to court again. It took a long time, two weeks I think. Finally the Judge said we could still live with mommy. We were so happy we screamed hooray! I thought we would loose because mommy's gay, but we didn't loose. We were so happy we hugged each other and we lapped and cried at the same time. Story written by Lisa

