

Queer Kids

high-school sweethearts,
earnest politics,
and the trouble with trendy

by Katrina Onstad

photo
David Hyde

The question is about sex.

"Oh..." Freida looks down, her face hidden beneath her long hair. She's 17 and, accordingly, awkward on occasion.

Freida glances over at her friend Eftidios, who is blushing just slightly, a fitting expression for his big, gentle face. Freida is bisexual; her classmate Eftidios will only say shyly that he is "definitely not entirely heterosexual."

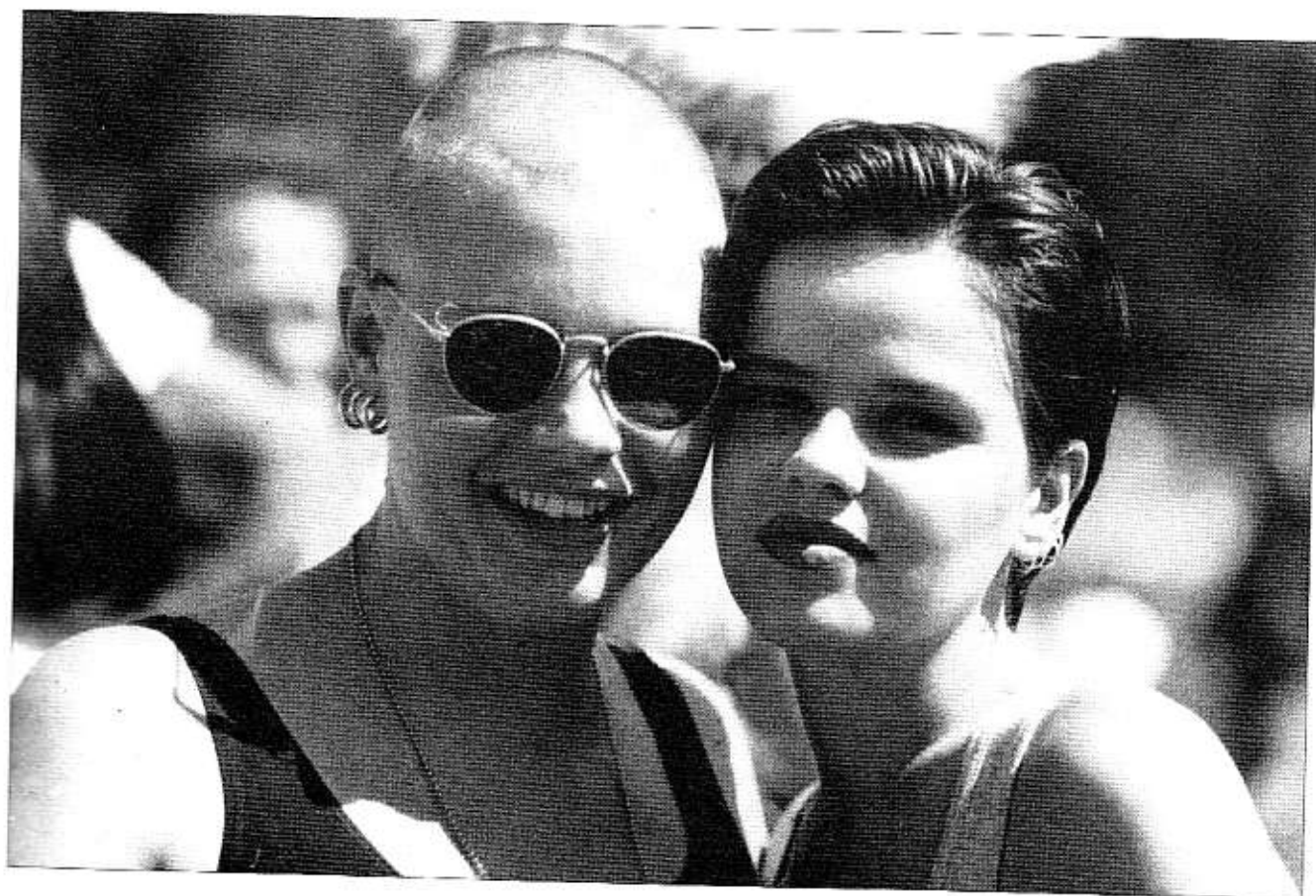
"I flirted with a guy once," Eftidios pauses. He measures each word carefully. "That's as far as I've gotten."

"The thing is," Freida says, all gawkiness suddenly subsumed in a wave of political aggression, "the issues are different for us. It's not about getting laid yet, it's about getting into the community first, about establishing friendships and being with other people."

Eftidios and Freida are part of a new high-school phenomenon. It's been called the teenybopper sexual revolution. They've been labelled baby dykes, kiddie queers and LUGs (Lesbians Until Graduation). In 10 years some of them may be in opposite-sex marriages with 2.5 kids and a split-level in the 'burbs, while others will be at the forefront of the gay movement.

"Two years ago at my school, there was one dyke and that was it," recalls Freida. "Now people feel they have the freedom to question their sexuality without making a decision about it yet."

The backdrop for this freedom is a new public awareness around homosexual issues. The American gays-in-the-military debate started the cameras rolling, and the



recent narrow defeat of Bill 167 in Ontario – which would have given same-sex couples the same rights as common-law straight couples – brought the issues to Canada's doorstep. At Toronto's Gay Pride Day, a month after the defeat of the bill, thousands of teenagers joined 300,000 people marching, dancing and sucking "pride-sicles" under the theme "The Best is Yet to Come."

Nineties pop culture has sucked up and spat out this political fervour with a vengeance: Cindy Crawford straddles k.d. lang on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. Tom Hanks suffers from Maybelline-coated AIDS in *Philadelphia*. Lesbian chic. Body piercing. Disco. Much of what's "cool" for straight culture in 1994 was hip in the gay and lesbian community an eon ago.

The media fixation on queer culture leads some young gays to defend themselves against accusations of trendiness. "Oh, I'm so bored with it all," declares 17-year-old lesbian Mariama. "Gay, gay, gay."

This get-over-it sentiment is a privilege – not all teens are so lucky. "A lot of these kids are dropping out," says Tony Gambini, a social worker at the Toronto Board of Education. In response, the board has introduced a program of counselling and class presentations on homophobia and homosexuality.

But many of today's young lesbians, bisexuals and gays don't rely on adults for guidance – they rely on each other, in friendships and in youth organizations. They look to the older generation, but remain wary of condescension. They're critical, thoughtful and extremely aware of the political implications of their sexual identities.

Some, like Eftidios and Freida, are the new activists. Some just want to get laid. And others, in the face of media scrutiny, want to be left alone.

City School is not like the high school on Beverly Hills 90210. It's not even like *Degrassi*. City is an experimental alternative school, the kind of place where teachers are called by their first names and a kid in a ripped jean jacket can give a presentation on Kurt Cobain in his English class. City School is so "P.C." that students organized a Queer History Day last year. Because City is such an anomaly in the public school system, the press is often seen sniffing around for stories that require an alternative perspective.

So world-weary student Mariama doesn't want to be interviewed *yet again*. Her friends, however, have other ideas. After much debate, she grudgingly follows Shauna and Leon to Mr. Donut, under the condition that she be allowed to scribble at her French assignment while her friends talk. But after about one minute, Mariama – accompanying almost every statement with an eye-roll – takes her place as the most vocal of the group.

"Right now I identify myself as lesbian," Mariama says. "But I'm not really into permanent identification, that's just how I am right now."

Bulldozing ahead, she rejects all labels. "There's no such a thing as a queer youth movement. It's silly. It's like, hello, you go to a club and everybody's snobby and they don't say hello to you."

Shauna, an 18-year-old lesbian, disagrees. "I think

more young people are 'out' and comfortable with their sexuality than ever before."

Mariama and Shauna hold opposite ends of the same banner. The daytime talk shows would love to prop them up as physical and intellectual antagonists: Shauna with her combat boots and short-cropped hair, unfailingly positive about her sexual community; Mariama in her hippie-ish outfit, her curls flopping, wary - at least today - of the collective agenda.

Part of Mariama's negativity might have to do with her current theory on the popularity of same-sex issues. "It's like Berlin in the 1920s, or the Harlem Renaissance, when being gay was the thing to do. I think there are spurts when it's accepted, and then it's not."

Shauna, again in the opposing chair on the

imagined *Oprah* sound-stage, argues calmly. "But those people were bohemians. It wasn't in the mainstream. There was no k.d. lang then."

Still, Mariama's reluctance to declare the dawning of a new age is understandable. Last week, someone wrote this on the board in the student lounge at City: "Dykes are ugly birches with shaved heads who can't take a big dick."

Last year's Queer History Day was meant to combat the homophobia which Shauna says is "indirect, but always there" despite the institutionalized liberalism of City School. Shauna feels pretty good about the event. "It led to some discussions about homophobia that needed to happen, so I think it was productive."

Leon, an 18-year-old who considers himself bisexual, scoffs at Shauna's assessment. "I think

CALLING FOR HELP

The phones at the Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Youth Hotline haven't stopped ringing since the first call last May. Set up by a small group of volunteers, all under the age of 26, the Toronto-based hotline counsels kids who are confused about their sexuality or need some understanding and support.

"Since the line was set up we've been overworked and kept busy with calls around the clock," says Debbie Hazell, a member of the coordinating committee and one of the phone volunteers. "In the first month of operation, there were over 300 phone calls made," and according to Bell Canada "more than 2,200 unsuccessful attempts were made because of either a busy phone line or because the office wasn't open." The lines are currently open from 3 to 11 p.m. and the toll-free number only operates in Ontario.

According to a recent U.S. government report, nearly a third of all teen suicides are committed by gays, lesbians or bisexuals. Gay ado-

lescents were two to three times more likely than their heterosexual peers to attempt suicide. Alcohol, drug and substance abuse and mental illness rates are three times the average.

Tim Guimond, coordinator for the phone's outreach program, got involved because he could no longer wait for government action. "I got tired of waiting for services to be developed, and tired of seeing our friends kill themselves, or get beaten up, or have to work the streets to survive. So we just decided to develop our own youth services, our own education programs, our own hostels, and our own outreach programs."

"Most of the kids who call in are confused about their sexuality," Hazell says. This confusion often leads to feelings of isolation and alienation. Hazell says most calls come from outside of Metro Toronto, from rural areas where support services for gays and lesbians are scarce.

According to Gens Hellquist, a counselor at Saskatoon's Gay and Lesbian

Health Services, programs for gay youth "are only scratching the surface" of the problem. Hellquist runs a weekly youth group that's attended by up to 25 young people. Close to 50 adolescents have already graduated from the group.

"The biggest problem is support, or lack of it, for these teens. We're really in the midst of a major youth crisis," says Hellquist. "Many young kids, as they are growing up and going to school, find it very threatening to be identified as being gay or lesbian simply because of the persistent hateful messages that are out there.

"Unfulfilled lives come not from their homosexuality, but from a society that insists on disseminating vicious myths and denies people the opportunity to realize potential, develop caring support systems and love themselves and others."

Scott Langen

The Lesbian Gay Bisexual Youth Hotline can be reached at 1-800-268-9688.

there were people there who wouldn't have been there if they hadn't been given attendance points for it."

Shauna shoots back, "So what?" Leon shrugs his skinny shoulders. Shauna knows she's lucky to be able to discuss her sexuality, her girlfriends, her life, when she walks into City School. This freedom is one of the reasons she transferred to City from a "normal" school after grade 11. With an air of authority, she adds, "I would never have come out at a regular school."

The gay population at Freida and Eftidios's 2,100-student school is, according to Eftidios, "extremely underground." There was no Queer History Day at their school last year. There was, however, an entire week when posters advertising a forum on homophobia were ripped down daily and burned in the hallway.

Hostile environments at school and at home mean that Eftidios and Freida don't want their school identified. They also don't want their real names to appear in print, and offer these two as pseudonyms.

The only time Eftidios loses his slow, measured speech and asserts himself with absolute certainty is when he says, "I have never come out to my dad and I never will. My family is the most miraculously homophobic..." Freida interrupts him dryly: "The *second* most miraculously homophobic family."

She came out to her family last summer. "We haven't talked about it since January. They've asked me not to come out publicly until I move out of the house."

Over at City School, Mariama has a different coming-out story to tell. "I was so nerdy last year when I was 16. I told my mom and she was like, 'yeah, I kind of suspected so.' Now she's trying to introduce me to all her lesbian friends. One of them sent me a postcard that said, 'I'm so glad you're a lesbian. It's so cool!' I was *so* embarrassed."

What Mariama considers embarrassing, Eftidios might consider lucky. He lives with his father and his brother, and neither of them have any idea about his current sexual identity.

"My dad's thinking of joining CURE," he says. "I think it's because he has this big fear that I'm going to 'turn gay' on him."

CURE - Citizens United for Responsible Education - is a national watchdog group which tries to combat "the homosexual agenda" in schools and universities. Last year, CURE lobbied the Toronto Board of Education for changes to its resource guide on sexual orientation.

"We're not opposed to homosexuality in the classroom," says CURE leader Sue Careless, "but we need a balanced approach." The imbalance, according to Careless, is the assumption that homosexuality is a permanent state. CURE thinks it can be taught out of people.

In a pamphlet entitled "Unless You Act Now, Homosexuality Will be Promoted in Toronto Schools," CURE describes the Toronto Board's guidelines as "recruiting our children into accepting a homosexual lifestyle" through "emotional control," "coercion" and "hypnotic techniques."

Despite CURE's vocabulary of fear, the only place "homosexuality" appears on the provincial curriculum is in the phys-ed department. Unless a student has a City School-type teacher who decides otherwise, Gambini's by-invitation-only presentations are the only way larger gay issues, like homophobia and human rights, are discussed in Toronto's classrooms.

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Partly because of CURE's presence, Freida and Eftidios are active members of an anti-discrimination group at their school. At a high school where jocks rule and the principal publicly denounced a showing of *Philadelphia*, they have their work cut out for them.

"I have friends who are lesbian and aren't political," says Freida. "I have to admit, I have a real problem with that. They say, 'I don't want to be political or active but I want to have rights.' Well, who's going to get them for you?"

You'll find queer high-school students hanging at the 519, a community centre in the heart of Toronto's gay village. There, a group called Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Youth Toronto meets weekly. Shauna describes City as "one of the whitest, most middle-class schools in the city," but the young people who gather at LGBYT meetings are from all races, classes and mindsets. Even cynical Mariama turns up at the 519.

Still, meeting other young lesbians and gays can be difficult. There's the bar scene ("Officially, you have to be nineteen," says Shauna, "but let's face it, you don't"), there's LYPS (Lesbian Bisexual Youth Peer Support), there are the usual ways people meet people. Leon's quiet query about the future - "Will it be easier to meet people?" - echoes the wishes of people of all sexual orientations and ages.

But some desires are more generation-specific. "I'd like to meet some skater girls," sighs Mariama. "But I don't ride a skateboard."

Grade 13 student Mike doesn't go to the 519. He was planning to go to Pride Day, but only to watch, not to march. "I'm a passive guy," Mike says in his mellow "where's the beach?" voice. "I don't want to work to enjoy it, I just want to enjoy it."

The "it" in question is the bisexuality he came to identify last fall when he had a brief relationship with a male classmate.

Mike's attitude might piss Freida off a bit. But once she met him, she'd get over it. Good-looking and extraordinarily laid-back, Mike is

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easy to like. Mike doesn't remember ever hearing the word "homosexuality" in a classroom — he's never seen one of the board's presentations on homophobia and he is not aware of the counselling available to students. Frankly, he's not interested. "I'm just having fun," he says.

Mike admits that sexuality is a hot topic at his school. "There's a real fascination with the subject and it's not a negative fascination at all," he says, twisting his earring. But at the same time, Mike doesn't want the name of his school to be published.

As one of a group of "popular" kids, the floating question mark about Mike's sexuality is of interest to his peers. "I get a lot of younger girls coming up to me and whispering, 'Hey, are you bi?'" Mike responds to such questions with a flat "none of your business," he says, "because it isn't."

Although it might not interest him right now, Mike is at the centre of an ongoing question in the gay and lesbian world: Where do bisexuals fit in? For many, bisexuality is a permanent state. Other teenagers find themselves aligned with this group before making the final call on their sexuality. But bisexuals who expect to receive less hostility than homosexuals are often surprised. The complaint is that as a bisexual, one is written off as "other" by both straight and queer communities. That's a lonely tag to bear.

Leon, who is currently involved with a

woman, concurs. "The sense I got from some friends when I came out to them was like, 'you're not,' or 'you're just doing that to be cool.'"

But Freida believes her generation will be the first to cast off the bisexual stigma. "In the high school scene, bisexuality is more accepted, even if it's not called that," she says. "People say, 'oh I'm het, but I'm experimenting.' I don't think we're as hung up on labels. We're heading towards a freedom of 'maybe, maybe not.'"

One perspective almost all these high school students share is an adamant rejection of the criticism that they're blindly following the latest MTV-like declaration that Queer is Cool!

"One thing I hope you make clear in your article," Shauna says three times over the course of the interview, "is that it's fucking hard to come out in high school, and to say we're doing it to be trendy is ageist and demeaning."

But they are not without influences. The role models the students cite would make for a pretty entertaining dinner party: Svend Robinson. Feminist folkie Ani Difranco. Lesbian author Susie Bright. And Darlene, the sulky teenage daughter from *Roseanne*, the one who lies on the couch clutching the remote and muttering one-liners like "high school is just learning lies and telling lies."

Other role models are more local. Freida is active in her Anglican church. Although she isn't "out" there, she finds support in older gay friends at church largely because they refuse to be in the closet.

"For the first time, teenage queer people have a pretty out adult group to look to," Freida says. "Especially in Toronto, there are a lot of out adults. It's comforting for us to know that once we turn 25 we're not going to have to change."

Still, Eftidios is tense about the way things are going for gays. "I don't know whether it's going to be more or less acceptable in the future. With the bill that just failed, I can see it going either way."

Freida, however, is optimistic and looks forward to her own university activism in a year. "I feel that it is a big movement," she says. "It's not just some trend that's going to pass in a couple of years." Freida won't write off people like Mike, whom a cynic might view as a bandwagon-hopper. "If you're going to think of being queer with a 'me too! me too!' attitude, somewhere down the line, it's going to break down because it's also an issue of sexuality. At some point, it comes down to whether or not you have an attraction."

And even if Mike is straight in a decade, he'll never respond to gays and lesbians the same way. "I guess I've been too lucky," he says. "I haven't had to fight yet." The operative word is yet. ♡