



## The importance of knowing one's history

By Jessica Haight, circa-Spring 2004

Since "coming out", so to speak, I've been presented with a number of assumptions and stereotypes of the gay "community" (and I use the term loosely), and I take great satisfaction in debunking them one by one. Currently prevalent in my mind is the idea that, once somebody acknowledges their alternative sexuality, they are automatically laden with working knowledge of every aspect of GLBT issues, culture, and history. They are expected to have a well-informed opinion on these matters, as well, and are regularly consulted as a "representative" for "their people".

But even though it only comprises roughly ten percent of the population, the GLBT "community" is just as diverse as its heterosexual counterpart. There's a lot of overlap, and just as kids go into school without a working knowledge of the Civil War or the French Revolution, so too are gay youth unable to inherently know the exact year that homosexuality was stricken from the American Psychological Association's list of mental disorders (psst, it's 1973), or just who, exactly, Alfred Kinsey was. It has to be learned, and in case it wasn't obvious already, these factoids aren't exactly turning up in high school history texts.

People have a right to know their history, and should, once they hit a point where they can comprehend the complexity of various past events and their ramifications, \*want\* to learn about it. If GLBT youth - and adults, for that matter - don't know what their gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered ancestors accomplished, what groundwork they laid, then how are we ever going to be able to apply it to current similar issues? We live in a society where "gay" is the new "black", where homosexuality, in all of its shades of rainbow, permeates major media on a regular basis - but if the GLBT community were to appoint a spokesperson a la Martin Luther King Jr. to represent their fight for civil rights, we'd still have to have a working knowledge of who s/he is.

We need to be able to prattle off names like Harvey Milk and events like Stonewall without hardly blinking; and furthermore, we need to have them infiltrate the heterosexual world as well. Gay and

straight people are not factioned off with lines drawn down the middle of whatever land mass they happen to be standing on - they work together, interact with one another - sometimes, without knowledge of even doing so - and occasionally even live together. If we're ever to be considered "equal" in the socio-political sense, therefore, we need to be able to explain from whence we came and why it's important that mistakes of the past are not repeated in the future.

Perhaps then, we'll see GLBT issues being mentioned in history textbooks. Perhaps then, more people will be able to explain why it's hypocritical to call our current political system "a separation of church and state" when archaic, 2,000-year-old church doctrines are the best justification officials can come up with for denying gay people the right to civil liberties like marriage. Perhaps then, we will truly be one community, despite our differences.