

Hearing the Lesbian Voice

One of our longest running columnists looks back. **By Victoria A. Brownworth**

People often ask me why, since I have had a job writing for the mainstream press for years, I also still write for the queer press. I am also frequently asked why we need a queer press at all. These questions make me a little impatient and a little sad.

I write for the queer press because I'm a lesbian. I want to write for my own community, not just the straight community. I want to write about issues that directly impact my people.

As for why we need a queer press, the answer is because we

for the *Advocate*. But I felt excluded from my own life as a lesbian because all the stories I wrote were either for a straight audience or for a gay male audience. The same impetus that made publisher Frances Stevens found this magazine made me want to write for it. Where was the lesbian voice?

A decade before I began writing here, I edited an insert for *PGN*, my

the women of *The L Word* the way straight women do over the men of *Grey's Anatomy*? Of course.

It's about balance.

A lesbian writer I have known for decades often complains that there's not enough good lesbian writing out there, that there's too much fluff. I agree. But there's also not enough good writing, period. It's not endemic to lesbianism. And part of true equality, I think, is being able

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local Philadelphia gay newspaper, and called it "The Lesbian Voice." It focused on lesbian issues, news and culture. But the endeavor was short-lived and I was soon back on the gay male beat at that paper.

So when this magazine approached me, my own lesbian voice had been pent up for a long time. It was very freeing to have a space to write to and about lesbians. I no longer had to subsume my own lesbianism in my writing.

Over the years of writing for this magazine I have never wavered in my desire to address the community of women eager for news about the lesbian world. Just because Ellen is on TV every afternoon doesn't mean we have been mainstreamed.

This publication, like any other glossy, monthly "lifestyle" magazine, has addressed a range of issues, trends and gossip over the years. A lot of serious stuff comes out of the magazine, and there's also a lot of entertaining fluff.

But it's all queer. And sometimes you need fluff just as much as you need serious writing. Shouldn't we be able to crush out on

to have it all—the guilty-pleasure fluff as well as the prize-winning journalism and literature.

Over my years here I have almost always written about the serious issues: dykes on death row, rape, domestic violence, cancer, child custody. Politics and more politics. Occasionally I have written the fluff—interviews and entertainment pieces. I have loved doing it all.

Not only has it been a very powerful experience for me to talk directly to a queer audience, but I have, on occasion, actually gotten to see how much it has meant to my readers.

A few years ago, a lover of mine died of cervical cancer. I promised her when I visited her in hospice that I would write her story. I wrote about her unnecessary, untimely and very lesbian death—she'd had no health insurance, no regular doctor, and, as a butch lesbian, had felt uncomfortable going to the gynecologist.

After the story was published, we got a series of letters from women who had read the piece, gone and gotten tested and found they had cancer. These women wanted to say how the story saved their lives.

This is why we need a queer press and why we need independent publications. Over

Even after 19 years we still need a lesbian press.

need to make our voices heard. We need a queer press because we are not yet full citizens of this or any other country, and mainstream culture is as uninterested in our lives as it is in our civil rights. If we want our stories told, we need writers like me, writers who have a personal investment in telling those stories.

When I began writing this column, 19 years ago (when it still went by the name *Deneuve*), it was because I wanted to write for and about lesbians. At that time, I was a reporter for one of the largest daily newspapers in the country and also wrote regularly

Shaking Things up in Bogotá



Colombia's new lesbian mayor

nearly two decades, we have established a relationship with our readers. We are speaking directly to lesbian, bisexual and transgender women about the things that matter in their lives. We are reaching out not just to the Castro district in San Francisco and the Village in New York City, but to all the places where lesbians live and work and maybe aren't able to come out to their families and friends, but can read about being lesbian and imagine that one day they will be able to be out safely in their own town. Or maybe they'll be encouraged to move to Chicago or Atlanta or West Hollywood and come out there.

When I was a young lesbian there was no lesbian press. There was a burgeoning gay male press and a feminist press, but nowhere for lesbians to hear the panoply and diversity of their own voices. **Curve** gave us that.

No doubt there are those who think of it as just another "women's" magazine, no different from *Cosmo*, *Glamour* or *Elle*. Certainly there are aspects of those magazines in ours. But it still all comes back to one thing: queer. The voices in this magazine are queer. The writers and editors are queer. The subject of our discourse here—whether we're writing about music or art, books or TV, politics or sex—is queer.

When you pick up this magazine, whether it's at the Starbucks off Castro Street, at your local queer bookstore or at the end of the dirt road where it just arrived in your mailbox, when you open it up what you see are women, women, women. Lesbians mostly, but also bisexual and transgender women. But it's all about us, our queer female voices and what we have to say—whether we are young or old, fat or thin, white or of color, tattooed up and pierced or seemingly conservative, athletic or disabled, rich or poor.

Why do we need queer writers and a queer press? Because we have things to say and issues to address that the straight media could not care less about, but that are vital to our lives. Why do we need **Curve**? Because 19 years after one lesbian put up her own money to print a much less glamorous version of the magazine you are now reading, our voices are still easily drowned out in the straight world and the gay male world, and we want our own, clearly heard voice. **Curve** gives us that voice. And I, for one, after 19 years, am still grateful. ■

In any guidebook to Colombia you come across today, there is inevitably a paragraph describing how deeply entrenched *machismo* is in this staunchly Roman Catholic country. Although Colombia is changing and, in fact, it has some of the most progressive laws for same-sex couples in the entire Western Hemisphere, out lesbians and gay men in the public eye are still few and far between.

That's what makes Blanca Durán, the 36-year-old mayor of the Chapinero district of Bogotá, a true trailblazer. She's out, and Colombia is proud.

"I thought it was important to talk about being a lesbian so that others would see that you don't have to hide in the closet in Colombia anymore," Durán told reporters when she was elected. "I hope that it will make it easier for others to come out and give greater visibility to the gay community."

Politics didn't come naturally to Durán, who is an industrial engineer by training. After college, however, as she slowly embarked on a path of self-acceptance, she also began to gravitate toward activism. She became a member of a left-leaning party, the Polo Democrático, where she was one of the founders of the Polo de Rosa, the Party's LGBT interest group. Under her leadership the Polo de Rosa frequently flexes its muscle: Recently, they had a party senator admonished for voting against the

rights of same-sex couples.

She was also an active board member of the main LGBT rights organization in the country, Colombia Diversa. Thanks in great part to its efforts, the movement has seen some extraordinary successes. After several attempts for recognition of couples' rights had failed in the congress, Colombia Diversa got Colombia's highest court to grant civil union rights for same-sex couples this past January.

Without a doubt, that decision catapulted Colombia alongside Uruguay and Canada into the spotlight as one of the most advanced countries in the hemisphere in terms of gay rights. It has made an enormous impact on the community. But similarly important for the movement is getting gays and lesbians in the public arena to *dar la cara*, or become visible. Enter Durán.

She begins her workday at 6 a.m. She is constantly meeting with community groups and is obsessed with convincing the police that, yes, women are capable of being tough on crime. Much of the job can be routine, but it is promoting *convivencia* ("living together") among Chapinero residents, gay and straight, that means perhaps the most to Durán, and will be at the top of her agenda for the remainder of her term. "I hope that we can get to a point where getting along doesn't mean we have to kick out those who are different," she says. [Andrew Dier]