

REMEDIAL CLASS

→ In the wake of a controversial media story, the community acts up and speaks out

Story **Gordon Bowness** Photography **David Hawe**



Howls of indignation spread from Facebook and blogs to calls for boycotts in response to a recent cover story in Toronto weekly *The Grid*. It was written by a young gay man who, claiming to have grown up free from discrimination, felt totally disconnected from the broader LGBT community. He wrote that his world, the young hipster scene of Queen Street West,

had nothing in common with the Church/Wellesley neighbourhood and what he characterized as the community's hard-done-by political discourse and gawdy, sex-obsessed culture.

Compounding the story's myopia and overgeneralization was the editors' decision to position the first-person account as representing a wholesale societal shift. The paper's cover boldly claimed,

"Beyond Gay: No more rainbows. No more Village. The rise of the Po-mo Homo."

There's been amazing ideas and passions expressed in response to the story. But the tone at times has been vitriolic.

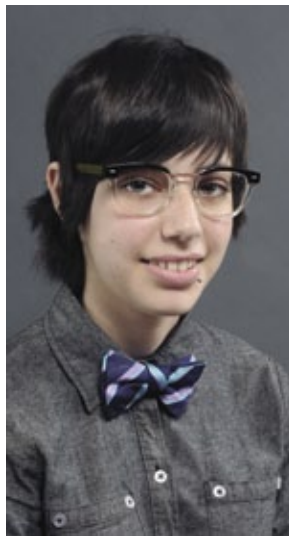
We don't need more vitriol. This isn't another slam piece. This is an attempt to take the heated conversation ignited by the story to a positive place, where we can talk cre-

atively and constructively about identity and community.

THE YOUNG, SHE IS A STRANGE RACE

"There are people in my generation who complain all the time about the Village," says Jonathan Nathaniel, 24, co-host of MTV's *1 Girl, 5 Gays*. "It really matters to some of them which scene they

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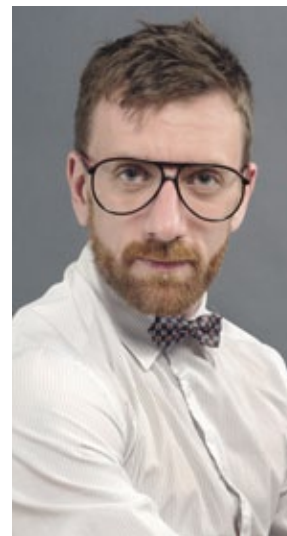
LEANNE ISKANDER, 16



LALI MOHAMED, 23



JONATHAN NATHANIEL, 24



BRENDAN HEALY, 36

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join, the music they listen to, the clothes they wear.”

Plus ça change. It happens every generation.

“We’ve seen it all before,” says Helen Kennedy, director of national lobby group Egale Canada and veteran Toronto-area politician. Clones versus hippies, homo-core versus circuit, femmes versus feminists — every generation defines itself in opposition to the styles and language of those who preceded them. Kennedy, a 54-year-old motorcycle-driving Dubliner, recalls the fight between “bell-bottoms versus drainpipes.” I think it

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had something to do with slacks.

“The tension between young and old is as old as time,” says Buddies in Bad Times artistic director Brendan Healy, 36. “The young will always say something that they think is very meaningful that the old will see as ridiculous.

“The tension between generations is the way history moves forward.”

But is this new generation differ-

ent? Did The Grid get that right?

“Those young men in The Grid story,” says Kennedy, “even though they didn’t know it or express it, they were taking advantage of the blood, sweat and tears shed in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s. Should we begrudge them their freedom, as naïve as they are? I mean why are we doing this work?”

“Once you waded through the stench of entitlement, there’s something interesting happening.”

Stench of entitlement or whiff of freedom? There could be a young LGBT cohort coming of age without a sense of political struggle.

“No way,” says Leanne Iskander, the 16-year-old student fighting to set up a Gay-Straight Alliance in her Catholic high school in Mississauga. “There are 30 kids in our group and they’re all socially conscious. And not just around the gay thing. I mean, racism isn’t over either.” Iskander, recently named co-Grand Marshal of the Pride Parade, can come across as shy but she has an unshakeable sense of what’s right. If she’s got entitlement issues, then we need more of that. “I was really surprised when the school denied our proposal for a GSA,” she says. “I didn’t want to take no for answer. I mean, I had

all these kids signed up already.

“We set up a Facebook page so that everyone could keep track of what was going on. Then the media picked up on it.” What happened next surprised Iskander. “I never would have expected such an amazing response. I never thought so many people would care. It really encouraged us to keep on fighting.”

Lali Mohamed, 23, a former board member with the Youth Line, was outraged when the assumption that youth are apolitical and narcissistic carried through into the various responses to The Grid story. “Young people today are doing really transformative work in this city,” he says. “When we don’t see young people as leaders, when we don’t see young people as engaged or socially conscious — that’s just ageist bullshit.”

Nathaniel isn’t so sure. “I think one thing that story stumbled upon is the hunger of my generation to be seen for who they are first, before their scene label comes up... before their sexuality comes up. They want their basic humanity to be seen first.

“They just have to remember that the only reason that is a possibility is because of our forefathers.”

WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET

What is this thing called community that the young may or may not relate to? Church and Wellesley is not the community, it’s a neighbourhood; granted, a very important neighbourhood given its history, the number of LGBT institutions found there, the bar scene, the media outlets and the fact that it’s still the entry point for a huge number of people. But it cannot stand in for the whole community.

What you see at Church and Wellesley — and what you don’t — is really up to you. Compare the experiences of two young men like Mohamed and Nathaniel.

Mohamed was born in Bonn, Germany. His family moved to Toronto when he was 6; he grew up in Etobicoke (Mayor Rob Ford’s former ward). As a gay Somali Muslim he has no contact with his family. “When I came out I thought I was going to find a sense of community and belonging,” he says. “That didn’t happen. I wanted to find a surrogate family, instead I was fetishized by the predominantly gay white men of Church and Wellesley.” So he set out to build his family, by joining a queer discussion group at



DAWN WHITWELL, 41



NIK REDMAN, 41



HELEN KENNEDY, 54



FRANCISCO ALVAREZ, 54



FAY SLIFT, ageless

Ryerson University, by volunteering with the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention, two places where Mohamed found a varied group of queer people of colour with a passion for social justice. "It was so important to me not to feel like the only black gay person, the only gay Muslim. I wasn't alone.

"It's still important to ask why aren't there more people of colour in the Church/Wellesley Village. Racism keeps some of us out." So Mohamed co-founded Deviant Productions to start documenting the stories of queer people of colour, he set up a queer program for Black History month and he's currently an outreach worker for Egale. Why? "I wanted to survive. My need for a family was so great. And I didn't want people who came after me to experience the same isolation I felt."

Nathaniel, meanwhile, was born and raised in Brampton. He moved to Toronto and came out at 19. "I've loved Church and Wellesley from the moment I first moved to the city. I still do," he says. "It was very eye-opening, inspiring, overwhelming as a new gay, a young gay. Here was a place for me where I felt totally comfortable and safe. It was overwhelming to see so many

out gay men just as I was defining myself as an out gay man. I felt vulnerable, because I didn't know who I was yet, but I also felt open to it.

"I never saw Church Street as representing one thing. I did and do enjoy going there. I also love partying in Queer West. What a blessing to have that option. That's what I love about Toronto, I have the luxury of choices."

One young man works to change the face of Church and Wellesley because he needs to; activism is part of his DNA. The other loves the Village as it is because he can; it's just one of many social options. Both reach out and mix it up with the people of the Village. Because they seek out the community, they find it.

"Queen West is a great place for a party," says Mohamed, "but if you need tools to survive, the resources are at Church and Wellesley. We need to support it, not bash it because it's a cool thing to do."

IT'S COMPLICATED

None of us are born into the LGBT community; we each have to find our own way here, to the gay neighbourhood, the lesbian label, the trans body. We are all immigrants. The journey is becoming

less fearful for some. But it's still a solitary journey. We each have to find our own way, solo. Coming out to yourself is just the beginning.

Comedian Dawn Whitwell recalls the first time she was surrounded physically by lesbians. She was performing at a Strange Sisters cabaret at Buddies. "Coming face to face with so many lesbians was really intimidating," she says. "What are the rules all these women have? Why isn't there a manual, or at least a who's who?"

"WHAT ARE THE RULES ALL THESE WOMEN HAVE? WHY ISN'T THERE A MANUAL, OR AT LEAST A WHO'S WHO?"

Whitwell, now 41, grew up in Hamilton and didn't come out until she was 29. "There you are, you've gone through the fear and anxiety of coming out and you're ready to declare, 'This is who I am.' And then you are confronted with the idea, 'What if they don't want me?'"

Fear of rejection remains a powerful undercurrent in our community.

"When I was younger," says JP Kane, 40, an elementary school teacher, "I'd go to Woody's and look at all the muscley buff guys and think, 'Oh, is that what gay is supposed to be?' Body issues are tough to figure out. Eventually I came to terms with my body. I am just a big boy. And I like that. That's why I like queens, they take up a lot of space."

Kane, who's a popular drag performer called Fay Slift, came out at 22 while attending the University of Guelph. But he admits to keeping his distance from the queens when he first started coming to Church and Wellesley. "Maybe I had a phobia," he says, "that feeling deep inside: I am not like that." Over the next 10 years, Kane learned to appreciate the art of drag; he started performing in 2008. "Queens are very outspoken. They take huge risks by jumping out of these defined gender roles. I think that's why some people don't like them, they force you to look inside yourself and confront your own internalized homophobia.

"Everyone has to go on a journey to come to terms with all the various parts of what gay is," he says. "If you still struggle, then you are

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“IT ISN’T QUEER TO TELL SOMEONE HOW TO BE QUEER.”

going to be disturbed by how others portray themselves.”

Some guys hate rainbow-waving queens. Some women are troubled by bois. And everyone over 30 wonders, “What’s up with those kids?” Putting down others is so high school, but we keep going there.

“It isn’t queer to tell someone how to be queer,” says Healy, a Montrealer who arrived here in 2000. “This means we have to have this conversation with respect, responsibility, thoughtfulness and openness. Any conversation about community is going to be incomplete.... It’s a complicated and beautiful attempt.”

COMMUNITY IS A VERB

Our community is a whirling dervish of change.

“As co-chair of Pride I do believe that there is something that connects us, some common ground for all people who are not heterosexual,” says Francisco Alvarez, 54, who was born in Bogota, Colombia and raised in Ottawa. “Just like it means something to be Canadian, whether you are from the East Coast or an immigrant.

“When I was younger, I only knew gay men. I don’t think I knew a single lesbian. Then when I started volunteering in the AIDS community, I saw how important lesbians were in the response to the crisis. So many gay men were traumatized and lesbians stepped in and really fulfilled a caring role as nurses and social workers. That’s when lesbians became a part of my community.”

As a gay trans man, Nik Redman is all too aware of how differences

can overshadow similarities. “Not everyone is open to trans issues,” he says, “they don’t remember that we have been a part of the movement for 40 years, that trans women were at the vanguard of Stonewall. That’s just how our history gets erased.”

Redman, 41, grew up bouncing between Barbados, Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto. He’s a grievance officer for the Steelworkers’ local at U of T and is known in the clubs as DJ Nik Red; he’s been on the scene for nearly 20 years. “We are not recognized as whole citizens in this country,” he says, “there are still really relevant fights out there.



→ **GRIDLOCK** The Grid’s “Dawn of a new gay” story, with its Queen West hipster cover, sparked a passionate, at times vitriolic, response from across the LGBT community.

This LGBTQ conglomerate still needs to achieve a lot more things. Sometimes the LGB part gets that, sometimes they don’t, some may never get it. Transgender equality escapes them.”

In their roles as heads of large organizations that try to embrace our raucously diverse community, people like Alvarez, Healy and Kennedy know the pitfalls of talking across difference — they’ve probably fallen into a few. They all

have the same advice: Listen.

Bay street power brokers? Married-with-kids homeowners? Radicalized poverty activists? Blissed-out party fiends? Speak up. Claim your space. Community is not a zero-sum game. There’s always room for more.

ARE WE THERE, YET?

Work brings us together; for good and for ill, there’s still plenty of work to do. This isn’t the place to catalogue all the struggles LGBT Canadians still face. Let one fact stand for the rest: On page 52 of the “Beyond Gay” issue of The Grid was a tiny classified ad from PLFAG Canada stating, “One third of all suicides are in the LGBTQ community.” No matter how self-satisfied you feel in your own life, how can you remain complacent in the face of that number?

Even in our bubble of downtown Toronto, poverty, bashings, and death exist side by side with our happy shiny freedoms. “It’s easy to forget,” says Whitwell. “That’s why we have to remember.” Whitwell has taught women-only comedy classes for the past two years (“There’s power in making a room full of people laugh”). She was recently kicked out of a Catholic school board seminar on bullying for being a married lesbian. “I was shocked... It never occurred to me that I would be discriminated against, and for being married, of all things.”

“For my generation, freedom is a political struggle,” says Alvarez. “It’s a hard struggle, one that needs to continue, especially given the politics of the time, with Mayor Ford, Prime Minister Harper and possibly Premier Hudak. Our victories can easily be erased so we have to continue to assert our presence, demand our rights and advocate

for those who don’t have rights.”

If the young don’t relate to our current forms of political discourse, how do we engage them? We could poke them with a stick like The Grid.

“Out of all that’s happened around this story,” says Nathaniel, “I feel like for the first time in my generation, LGBTQ youth are acting up and speaking out. I hope more youth show up and prove that this article is just one person’s perspective and not their own. I care. It does matter.”

But provocation sucks up too much oxygen. The young need their space. “It’s a big mistake to try and define the conversation,” says Kennedy, “because young people are already having their own conversation.

“All we can do is put out a ton of resources and let them cherry pick what they need.”

Queer youth may be coming out earlier and they may have no reason to find their way to the broader community, at least initially.

Where does that leave us?

“I like to see it as a house with many rooms,” says Redman, “where everyone has their favourite room but they live all together. If you take just one of the rooms out, even if you hardly ever went in there, you’re going to miss it. A house needs heat, love, water, care and maintenance. Maybe because you have a limited amount of time and energy you shove everything into just one room, but as a result, the rest of the house will suffer.”

So we’ll go on creating the most vibrant, inclusive and seductive community possible, so it’s there when the next generation needs us. And they will need us.

And we need them. •