

The following article is written by an Indian lesbian. It contains many truths about her experience. Some facts have been changed to protect her identity. It is truly unfortunate that it is necessary to do so...

I was still at home on the reserve when I knew I was a lesbian. Of course, it was always there but I never identified myself with a label until I was in my late teens.

I probably took longer than I needed to come to recognize I was a lesbian. On my reserve there weren't any "role models" for me, at least none that I was aware of. Any talk I might have overheard about homosexuality was usually very derogatory towards gays in general. There were plenty of conversations about woman's role in completing creation though.

I went through a time when all my aunts and female cousins asked about my boyfriends. They generally planned out their version of normal with my life, when was I getting married, etc. The whole routine. I even played the game, but I knew it was a lie.

We were bussed back and forth from the reserve to high school every day. We would put on our masks as we entered the school yard. My mask had a mask. I was involved with lots of sports for the closeness, comradie and the showers. I had crushes through my school years. There were a few opportunities to experience the life I craved.

After I finished school, there came the opportunity to go and work in town. It was easy to blend in with the city, especially after living under the microscope of the reserve. Soon I moved on to the bright lights of a much

larger city further away from the reserve.

Working, money and anonymity allowed me to indulge my passions at long last. It took a few months to get settled in, but friends and relatives from back home and school helped. It took time to learn to get used to the noise, the pace, the attitudes and the impersonalness. Part of developing urban living skills led me to bars. In the city there is more than one kind of bar. I began to go exclusively to lesbian bars.

At home on the reserve, the general attitude towards homosexuality is what I consider pretty red neck, usually ignorant and homophobic. In most respects they mirror what I've witnessed out here. There are, of course, accepting and supporting people as well, but they don't seem to be the majority.

At the bars, Indian women seem to go out of their way to acknowledge each other. Our standard greeting is to ask "where are you from?" Home is one of the things that make us different.

When we get to talk to each other about being Indian and gay, we talk about how our communities react, whether to us individually or generally to the idea of homosexuality.

Lots of Indian people I've talked to have said their families reacted well. We all had one relative or another who didn't know or wouldn't acknowledge we were gay. Those whose announcements weren't received well were often subjected to extreme responses such as never being spoken to again; physical violence, and being disowned.

I had already had a serious relationship when I knew I had to tell my family. I decided to tell them one at a time and be very direct. By the time I



got to tell my last brother and sister, everyone already knew. I have a big family. Mom understood and Dad maintains a major Indian stoic-with-few-words approach. My parents' general rule is that we don't talk about it and I never stay overnight anymore. It is too awkward for them. So I drop in for tea on my way elsewhere. They treat my partner civilly but with distance. They associate my lesbianism with the city, and non-Natives. They do not want to understand that, for me, it is the way the Creator made me.

I've been in the city for ten years now and have had a number of relationships and lovers. Lately some of us have been asking our Elders about our traditions and history in regards to homosexuality (Elders is the name we give to those amongst our people who have kept the old ways, true Indian values and beliefs alive).

The responses have been very different. I have been told homosexuality is a sickness. One Elder said that at one time we were all heterosexual. He said that some of the people did something wrong and were made to be attracted to each other. He pointed to the natural order of male and female and said homosexuality

comes from an unnatural place.

Other Elders say that the homosexuals have balanced inside themselves both male and female energy and are free to explore and experience what others can't — they need to seek their balance with help from the outside. These same Elders have said homosexual people are stronger spiritu-

ally and inclined to have special gifts.

Other Elders have said there is no explanation for the Creator's law, just that we are all governed by that law and therefore we are not to judge or criticize any relationships which are kind, honest and good. I have much preferred to believe the Elders who constitute the majority in seeing my lesbianism as more positive.

It has been through exposure to my Elders and the conditions I saw when I looked that lead me to question alcohol in my life. For the past three or four years I haven't drank. There is something very strong about me as an Indian in the statement I make by not using alcohol. Of course, I rarely go to "the bar" anymore so my statement impacts in all areas of my life.

I have realized that I am looking for someone to complete my circle, but not my identity. I've been involved with non-Indian women and Indian women in relationships. It has been easy to meet other Indian lesbians, but difficult to maintain relationships. One of my friends says this is because we are too intimate — we share a rich, deep, mystical and passionate history. Her belief has stirred quite a lot of

discussion in many different circles.

Since several of us have given up being bar flies, we have begun to discuss what we can do to make it easier, better for others who are coming from their reserves or even staying there at home. We have had some contact with fledgling Indian gay and lesbian support groups. Informa-

tion lines, resource services, social groups and support services are all needed. There aren't any financial resources available for things like these, but the people are committed and energetic. We (gays and lesbians) represent a minority of a minority, so even organizing is difficult. We come from all socio-economic, demographic and Indian backgrounds. Despite that, we are slowly coming to know each other. We do want to make it easier for others coming out.

This recognition is a mixed blessing. There are increasing numbers of Indians working for governments and Indian organizations. As these numbers increase, so do the numbers who are homosexual. Whenever we work together, the response is either so paranoid about being "exposed" that dealings are cool and brief, or we are moved to want to be more involved and supportive.

As I age I become more comfortable with myself. If people inquire, I am honest. I no longer feel compelled to tell everyone I meet, though. My comfortableness extends to all aspects of myself.

Many other gay Indians I know agree

that we have to come to grips with our

Indianness as well as our gayness. Perhaps nothing I have related so far would identify us as particularly different, but we are. It is important that we deal with our cultural identity as well as our sexual identity. There are threats to both all around us. These threats are from within and from outside.

