

CILIP Diversity Group Conference, 8 February 2006

“Pride or Prejudice?” – How well are Libraries serving Lesbian, Gay, Bi- and Trans- Communities?

LGBT people and libraries – how well do we do?

This is an edited version of the keynote speech given by John Vincent.

I'm proud to be here, taking part in this major Diversity Group Conference – and, amazingly, given it's 2006, still one of the first conferences to be devoted to this topic.

To begin, I'm a gay man – and how do I feel saying that? I'd like to start with a brief bit of my own story about my journey to where I am today. I knew I was different (we didn't have the words back in the 1950s!) from an early age, and, whilst I had not recognised who I was, my school peers had – and many of them, especially the boys at my secondary school, bullied me because they recognised that I was different, maybe gay. From about 14, I had worked in my local public library as a Saturday Assistant, and there I found not only supportive adults who treated me as an equal (whoever I was), but also all those sources of information about what I might be ...

For those of you who are too young to remember the 1950s and 1960s, it was not an easy time to be gay – at the simplest level, there were very few role models, and the only LGBT characters we ever came across were either those in trouble (arrested for cottaging, for example) or those who inhabited a mysterious, underground world (“Jules & Sand”). Because of all this, and not knowing who I really was, I came out as a gay man quite late – I was in my mid-twenties – and I hope that, growing up today, young people will have a very different experience. One final bit of my story – exactly 30 years ago, I found I had a very rare form of anaemia¹, which meant that I became seriously ill: my then GP did not take any notice of my condition (or my mother's requests for help for me), saying that the “problem” was because I was gay!

Where I am on my journey now is that I am completely comfortable with who I am – but also want to support others who are struggling with their identity, with being different, with coming out ...

So, looking at the position today, have things changed? Yes, of course – there have been immense gains during my lifetime, for example:

- Work equality for lesbians and gay men from 1 December 2003
- From October 2006, it will be illegal to discriminate against lesbians and gay men in the provision of goods and services
- The organisation, Proud Heritage, is working to locate LGBT materials across the country as a first stage to establishing a museum and archive.

¹ Sideroblastic anaemia.

However, I think that we're everywhere, but invisible! Television and other media coverage may have improved, to some extent, but what's life like in the real world?

- A survey quoted in *The Independent* 8 February 2006 says that nearly ½ of the lesbians and gay men surveyed had been the subject of verbal or physical abuse
- There are strong links between teenagers being bullied for being different and teenage suicide
- The murder of LGBTs
- The inability of people to believe that they can lead open lives – think Mark Oaten!
- The 'rumour-mill' which, especially via the media, suggests that people in the public eye may be LGBT.

So, what's it like in libraries?

There is some brilliant work going on, some of which (eg in Brighton & Hove) we are going to hear about today. However, at the same time:

- "Clause 28", although repealed, has left its legacy: many people think it's still in force; people think that we still cannot put on LGBT displays or produce booklists in libraries ...
- Many library authorities are buying stock for LGBTs, but some face enormous prejudice from staff who don't want to see it in their libraries
- When they hear about LGBT issues, some library staff treat the issue with polite dismissal
- I met a transgendered person on one training course I ran, but she was nervous about saying anything in the group, because her colleagues were not supportive
- Some people seem unable to judge appropriate ways of behaving towards LGBTs
- People say things such as "John's course was fine, but he didn't have to tell us he was gay ..."
- Because I work quite a lot with teenage boys (and I don't think this is my being over-sensitive), a few people behave as though this completely wrong.

I'd like to finish the introductory session by posing a number of demands – which I'd like you to think about, talk to me about during the day, and add to if possible. These are:

- A full recognition of our needs at work
- Proper equality at work, eg training and support for other staff to prevent our having to deal with hostile colleagues; and proper ways of dealing with homophobic/discriminatory members of the public
- Proper consultation and involvement of staff and the community
- Provision of a full range of stock (and to get beyond the barrier of how

it's going to be arranged, by consulting and experimenting)

- Support for young people
- Provision of information, especially web-based
- Displays and promotions.