

Why we need a new movement and identity for gay men in San Francisco and what some of us are doing about it.

Most gay men take good care of ourselves, and help our friends do the same. While many of us are happy, healthy, and well-connected, others in our community are having real problems around their health and well-being. Growing numbers of men are choosing to have condomless sex without disclosure of serostatus or the negotiation of safer sex strategies. Many HIV negative men perceive the inevitability of seroconversion. Many get lost in speed and alcohol use. Too many men maintain a laissez faire attitude towards their own health and well-being and that of their queer peers. Many of us are isolated and alienated from a community that in the past has proven itself to be innovative, wildly fun and capable of taking care of its members.

A large group of community members and health, social, and political gay activists came together to strategize about our health and well-being and how best to resolve some of the problems confronting our community. Conclusion: an approach other than the HIV/STD model that we've been inundated with for so long is needed to help re-define ourselves as gay men, ignite our creative and social spark, and re-establish our relationship to each other, the community and to the world at large.

Responding to this challenge, a group of us from SFGMCI engaged hundreds of men in conversations about the major concerns and issues they face as gay men. A major concern is the lack of a "community" to identify and associate with. Many men feel separated from one another and feel that they don't fit in. Beyond sex, partying and the gym, many have little or no social interaction with other gay men, and many emphasized a need for a new gay identity. To address the problems some of us have around health, HIV/STDs and substance use, the men we spoke with recognized the need for increasing our collective responsibility, and in a sex positive and fun way, tackling the apathy and low self esteem prevalent in our community.

Gay men once again need to be part of an extended and unified family, one that begins anew to tap into our activist and altruistic spirit. Success in securing our future health and well-being depends on our ability to reverse the disconnectedness so many of us have from one another. We see our San Francisco gay men's culture as being ready to embrace new norms around sex, having fun and being friendly with one another, health, well-being and collective responsibility. People take better care of themselves when they have a raised sense of self-worth and strong community affiliation. By directly addressing these principles, we believe that a stronger gay community will help us better adopt behaviors to enhance our lives, improve our physical and mental well-being, better celebrate each other in sex positive ways, and decrease many of the ills some of us face.

The members of the San Francisco Gay Men's Community Initiative have embarked on this community-building challenge and have spearheaded a new gay men's social and health initiative. Building on alliances between community members, service providers, business owners, and public and political leaders, this new effort is an opportunity to address what's keeping us apart and build new bridges to bring us (especially the most disenfranchised members of our community) together through empowerment, participation in new grass roots events, activities and support systems. We are building new innovative frameworks for making ourselves: more cohesive as a social network; healthier, happier, and less prone to put ourselves at risk; and, more caring and responsible to each other. In short, we are fostering increased social capital among ourselves by creating a new sense of community affiliation and a happier and healthier gay identity. By bringing these concepts into our day-to-day lives, we will take better care of ourselves, our partners and each other.

SFGMCI together with many diverse partners from the gay men's community in San Francisco have initiated an array of community building and health promoting activities. The SFGMCI released the Declaration of Gay Men's Rights and Responsibilities to stimulate an *ongoing* community dialogue about our responsibilities to each other, and our rights as gay men living in a larger society. We have initiated a series of community forums to stimulate a needed dialogue amongst gay men on issues ranging from racism, body image, family, how we age as gay men, inter-racial coupling, and the important role that having fun plays in our lives. We have launched the Wilde Chats, a series of Socratic style discussions challenging men's basic assumptions about the direction of contemporary gay culture, as well as Generations: a 20's to 80's Salon where gay men of all ages come together to share life stories, and learn from each others insights and experiences. We have begun organizing a series of social outings that are helping guys renew their sense of belonging to the larger gay men's community. For new arrivals, meeting people outside of the sex and party scene can be very difficult and intimidating; a new welcoming activities and materials on how to make it in San Francisco are being established. In an effort to address our culturally specific needs, we have launched community working groups and activities/events for Black gay men, Latino gay men, older gay men, and queer young men. Efforts addressing the specific needs of other groups within our community will happen as mentors/leaders step forward.

The future of our community is in our own hands. The scope and direction of these efforts will come from all of us. We as members of the San Francisco Gay Men's Community Initiative are hoping that many of you will join us. We are limited only by a lack of imagination and involvement.