

Finding Community at Wilde Chats

By A. Chinae

About three years ago, I was a year into mourning; my lover had died suddenly in our bed from a heart attack (his first). We had been together seven years, and I truly believed that I would be with this man for the rest of my life. My soul shattered. Friends gave all the support they could and I went to a grief counselor once a week for six months. Constant thoughts of suicide ran through my mind and my sense of hopelessness showed; strangers stopped me on the street and asked if I was all right. The counseling and the moral support of my peers helped immeasurably. I had a therapist to work on my issues and friends to check in on me, but I simply saw no point in living. I grieved 24/7 and I found life most unstimulating.

On one of my bored and depressed wanderings, I happened to see a flyer pasted in a store window announcing a gay philosophical chat group taking place the coming Saturday. I scoffed at the idea at first. A gay discussion group based on the Socratic method? One that called itself "Wilde Chats" (what did Oscar Wilde have to do with Socrates?) I pictured either a group of frustrated academics or a bunch of bored twelve-steppers biding time between meetings. I went anyway; my curiosity won out.

On that Saturday morning, at about a quarter to eleven, I went to the designated meeting place, a laundromat/café called Sit and Spin. I ordered a coffee and a biscotti, sat at a table and waited. I saw other guys arrive. A bespeckled young man asked if I was there for Wilde Chats. When I said yes, he sat at my table. About seven others joined us. Then right at eleven, Joe Imbriani walked in. Anyone who is a size queen for smiles would have been impressed with Joe. He exuded enthusiasm and warmth. He introduced himself and the concept of Wilde Chats: That gay men could get together informally and discuss their issues using the Socrates Café as a loose model; questions chosen were to be explored, rather than merely answered. This particular day was the third or fourth meeting of Chats and the first time for most of us. I felt heartened to see the group's enthusiasm. In my self-imposed exile, I had forgotten what it was like to be around intelligent guys who felt free to question the assumptions of society at large and even their own community.

I forget what question we explored that day, but I do recall the enthusiasm, the intelligence and the respect we showed, not only to the question but to each other. I was disappointed when the time

was up and we summarized what we had just discussed. For the first time since my lover's untimely death, I felt really good about something.

I learned that Wilde Chats was Joe's brainchild, though the inspiration came from the Socrates Café, which has a more classically academic construct. Wilde Chats is an activity of the San Francisco Gay Men's Community Initiative (www.isparksf.com). Recent statistics from the Health Department have showed that gay men feel a sense of distance and alienation from each other here in Gay Mecca. This sense of isolation can have severe repercussions: depression, drug dependency, risky behavior leading to seroconversion. Man does not live by bars alone (and with so many gay men in recovery, not even that). Wilde Chats was created to give gay men creative ways to simply connect in positive ways with other gay men. Joe's enthusiasm and my good experience on that Saturday convinced me to give Wilde Chats a chance again.

And again. And again.

After a few weeks, the number of gay men showing up for Chats doubled, sometimes tripled, the number of guys I had seen at my first group at Sit and Spin. We


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met every week now, alternating between the Three Dollar Bill Café and The Orbit Room. Every Saturday, Joe would make sure we got started on time and help us select a topic. Some examples: What is friendship in the gay community? Is there a prevalence of porn in our lives and does it affect the way we connect to each other? Do we suffer from more than our share of political apathy? We'd break up into groups, each with a monitor to help keep things on track, and we'd all meet back in an hour and share. Though the subjects we explored reflected our concerns, fears or ideals, we achieved more than mere discussion; we connected. We went (and still go) to brunch after Chats. We've seen each other during holidays and at private parties, theater outings and other events. Guys who would never meet each other at a bar or club have formed real friendships based on trust and respect.

Diversity, a controversial and difficult ideal, seems much more real and tangible with Chats. A whole range of men attend regularly. Men with jobs rub shoulders with men with careers or those who are on public assistance. The usual age range is from thirties to seventies, sometimes younger, sometimes older.

One particularly articulate man I met started attending Chats after a painful break-up of a fifteen-year relationship. The stimulating conversation inspired him to hold dinner parties at his home, lead chat groups and resurrect a group called Something Wilde (on late Sunday afternoons). Another man, an intense intellectual, hates small talk; Wilde Chats allows him to discuss issues dear to his heart in an intelligent manner and have a good time as well.

Wilde Chats is one of several groups run by SFGMCI. Brothas is a group for men of African ancestry, Sex Talk is a place for guys to discuss sex issues, and Generations is a group formed to foster dialogue between men of divergent ages. To find out more about these groups and other activities, check out the SFGMCI website or send an email to info@sfgmci.org.



Alfonso China has lived in the Bay Area for longer than he cares to remember. He feels eminently qualified to express his opinion on any subject he chooses. He also writes fiction, plays and screenplays. He can be reached at alfonso82@earthlink.net.