

# Twenty-Somethings Seek Something More

By Alex Sarmiento

The first time I set foot in the Castro was a cold, wet, and rainy Thursday afternoon in January 1996. I was fourteen years old. I had left James Denman Middle School and taken the M train. Normally, I would have gotten off at the stop next to my house. Not that day. I went past it, and twenty minutes later, I had arrived in the Castro.

It was a part of San Francisco that I had heard of with only the most negative connotations. I was both scared and amazed at what I saw. I felt guilty because I thought I wasn't supposed to be there since I was underage.

I walked the two wet blocks from the Castro Muni Station to my destination: LYRIC (Lavender Youth Recreation and Information Center). I spotted a three-story pink building as I rounded the corner of 18th and Collingwood. It was around 4 o'clock, and usually I would be home doing my homework and/or enduring my younger brother's mental and physical abuse.

But there I was, in terra incognita, even though it was still in the city where I'd been born.

I walked into the ground floor space. It was group chat day. I looked around and was shocked. There were kids some my age, some older, of all shapes and sizes, engaged in a group discussion. They welcomed me, not with open arms, but with an open mind. Not one of those kids I recognized from school, and they didn't know me either, but it didn't matter. I had

never been around gay kids, and for the first time in my life, I fit in.

At least that's what I thought. A few days later, I came out to my family, and they were angry with me, to say the least. The turmoil at home would soon collide with my school life, where I was already miserable. I had a nervous breakdown in early February and assaulted a classmate. The decision was made for me to spend a few weeks at McAuley Institute at St. Mary's Hospital.

After my stint there, I went back to school and also began trying to make my presence known at LYRIC. It was a struggle in both places. I barely graduated from middle school, and I would soon realize that just because we were all gay kids at LYRIC, it didn't necessarily mean that we would be friends. Actually, I got along better with most of the kids in high school than I ever did with the kids at LYRIC.

There was a huge chasm between me and the rest of the people there, and try as we might, this was one that could never be bridged. I didn't go to the same high school (if they even went to school at all) as they did. In fact, from 1996 to 2000, I didn't see one other person in my class at International Studies Academy go to LYRIC. Another problem was that, personality-wise, we clashed. I didn't have the kind of flamboyant personalities that they had, even if they were fronts. I was and still am a reserved person. I didn't wear the same clothes that they wore. My

top 40/adult contemporary music tastes were different from their dance/rock/hip-hop mix.

And there was the issue of having a home. It wasn't until I came to LYRIC that I discovered that many gay kids were homeless and resorting to prostitution and drug-dealing to keep afloat. I had the luxury of a home and food and clothing, even if my domestic life was anything but luxurious. I felt guilty. Compared to them, I was a fucking prince. I saw that there were people who were needier of love and support and validation than I was.

The trouble was that I too was scared and sad and lonely. I too needed love and support and validation. I had a hard time in high school, and I had a hard time at home, but I had an even harder time at LYRIC. Don't get me wrong – the supervisors and staff at LYRIC were wonderful people, and I learned a lot from them. But they were limited in what they could do, even with a myriad of resources at hand. My problems went far and beyond the usual gay teen issues, and not even the kindness and well-meaningness of a gay youth group like LYRIC could help. I felt guilty about bringing my problems to LYRIC, but at the time, I didn't know what else to do or where else to go.

This is in no way a condemnation or an indictment of LYRIC. Despite everything that I went through, I still treasure my years there. I loved going to their After School Programs. I would drop in on

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Friday night Men's Group from time to time. I participated in many of their events, from the Young, Loud, and Proud conferences to their dances to the March 1999 demonstrations at the State Capitol. I will forever be indebted to the pink, now purple, building that stands at 127 Collingwood Street.

I am now 26, one year too old for LYRIC's services. It is still a tough world for young gay people to be in. Twenty-somethings like me, who are too old for places like LYRIC, need, want, and demand a similar place for communion, for friendship, for togetherness, and the bar and club cultures do not count as such. For twenty-something queers to not have the support that many other age groups in the collective queer universe enjoy is wrong.

We are lucky that we live in an area where gay kids have the resources to grow into gay adults. But when we venture into the "real world," the rich array of resources is lost. Gay twenty-somethings still need and want validation, love, and support. We need and want better access to mental health services. We need and want places where we can be all of ourselves without the temptation of drugs, alcohol, and unprotected sex. We need more of our elder gay brothers and sisters to show us the way, to give us pointers, and to provide us with unconditional love.

The LGBT Center, as noble an organization as it is, falls way short in this regard. In fact, there isn't a single LGBT center or organization in the world that has a specific program for gay twenty-somethings. I can't even find a site on the Internet that

has even the most minimal support. The problem is that in all communities, not just the LGBT ones, when you reach a certain age, things like this should be second nature. If you can't pull it off, then fuck you. I don't know how we can change this, but it does need to be changed.

The gay community is missing out by not providing a positive, life-affirming image and structure for its young brethren. We demand equality and respect from the government, from our families, from our friends, from our communities of faith, color, size, political affiliation, and even our neighbors. But we fail to respect and uplift those who have the potential to lead the LGBT communities into the future and provide for future generations. For all the talk about barebacking, drug use, and homophobia ruining our communities, we fail to see that ignoring the existence of young LGBT persons is just as deadly. It's ironic that Whitney Houston's "Greatest Love of All," a gay favorite, begins with "I believe the children are our future," yet in reality we could care less about them.

I would love to see the day when young gay men and women can get the love, support, and respect from the rest of the LGBT communities that they demand from everyone else in the world. I would love to see a greater network among gay and progressive organizations that would provide resources and support for ALL gay people, be they in their twenties or eighties. But for now, I would simply love to be welcomed (not tolerated and not fetishized) in the community that I love.

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