

# “Brokies” Find Community Online and In-Person

By Pete Tannen

If I had been told two years ago that I would have many new friends locally, across the U.S., and around the world; spend many hours each night on an internet message board; and fly to five gatherings in one year – all because I saw a movie – I would have said, “You’re crazy.” But it’s all true. Before that, I wasn’t a movie enthusiast. And I’d never been on an internet message board before.

This all started in December 2005 when I read Annie Proulx’s amazing story, just before seeing the movie *Brokeback Mountain*. Something about this movie made me go back to see it a week later, then the next week, then the next. On Google, I found one of several *Brokeback Mountain* internet message boards. I discovered I was not alone and I soon became part of an online community. For me and many others across the nation and around the world, “Ol’ *Brokeback* got us good!” This took me completely by surprise, since I wasn’t seeking community. Quoting Annie Proulx, we were “each glad to have a companion where none had been expected.”

“Brokies,” as we call ourselves, have a shared interest – *Brokeback Mountain* – and a sense of connection. However, it’s much more than being a bunch of movie fans. *Brokeback Mountain* has fostered a strong sense of community because of its impact on our lives.

After enjoying this online community for awhile, I wanted to see the film along with others who it also deeply touched. I started a thread suggest-

ing Bay Area folks could meet at the Embarcadero Center Cinema for a specific showing. I now realize I was both taking initiative and taking a risk to leap from cyberspace to the real in-person world. Four of us gathered for the movie, followed by dinner and conversation. Over the next few months, Bay Area get-togethers to see *Brokeback Mountain* continued with growing participation. In April 2006, a *Brokeback Mountain* brunch was organized in New York. Another San Francisco Brokie and I made a conference call and talked with all 12 attendees.

While the internet community continued to grow, the live, in-person *Brokeback Mountain* community took a major step forward when another local Brokie discovered that *Brokeback Mountain* was going to be shown at the Castro Theater. Using the internet, he organized a social get-together before the 6 p.m. show. About 50 people from the Bay Area and Sacramento, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, Eugene, Seattle, Vancouver, New York, Florida, and even Samoa showed up. Locals picked up people they had never met at airports and opened up their homes. Some of us went to the Livermore Rodeo, Beach Blanket Babylon (one local Brokie is in the cast), a family-style North Beach dinner, and on a tour of the city and Alcatraz. It was a wonderful four days, with many hugs, lots of laughter, and sad goodbyes at the end. Afterwards, several attendees posted these messages: “Those were some of the most wonderful days of my life.” “It was like going to the high school reunion I’ve never attended and having the

only people there being all the kids in my school that I always liked the most.” “I came back with a heart that was full to overflowing. Your generosity of spirit, your enthusiasm and care of all of us will never be forgotten.” “I’ve just spent 4 days with lifelong friends that I just met.”

The next major event, “Auntie’s *Brokeback Mountain* Backyard BBQ” in Texas (three-days of socializing, a BBQ dinner, music, games, brunch, sightseeing, and a showing of the movie on a big screen TV), drew almost 90 people from the U.S. and Europe. Gatherings also took place in Atlanta, Boston, New York, Casper, WY (at a bookfest, where we met Annie Proulx), and other places, including some in Europe. The Memorial Day Weekend 2007 *Brokeback* BBQ in Estes Park, CO drew about 80 Brokies from North America, Europe, and Australia. This will become an annual event. The 2008 *Brokeback* Roundup in Wyoming is already being planned, as is a BBQ event in June 2009 in Alberta. A London get-together is also in the works. The Alberta Pilgrimage this past July was another international event attended by about 25 people. Visiting many of the sites in the Canadian Rockies and in small towns around Calgary where the movie was filmed added immensely to this gathering of friends.

As a result of these get-togethers, an in-person community has developed from the larger online community. People have discovered other common interests and many friendships have developed. Through the *Brokeback Mountain* internet connection,

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I have met and become friends with several gay men in the Bay Area, including one in the South Bay who has become one of my best friends. When a non-Bay Area Brokie visits the area, local Brokies often go out for dinner with the visitor, thus providing additional in-person connections for Bay Area gay men and their friends.

I had a wonderful email correspondence for a few months with a gay college student who I met on the message board. Seeing the film moved him to decide to come out to his family and friends, but he was afraid to do it. By sharing my coming out experiences of 30 years ago, I hoped to make things easier for him. On my way to the Oscar Night 2007 screening of Brokeback Mountain in Michigan, I drove to Wisconsin to meet him in person.

Brokies are a caring community. Whenever we find out a message board member is ill or hospitalized, many electronic get well wishes are posted and locals make a visit.

Although many Brokies are gay men, about half are straight women, who were also deeply affected by the film. At a few in-person gatherings, I've found out that some of these women had never met a gay man before. So connections continue to be made and possible stereotypes overcome. With this common emotional connec-

tion, these get-togethers have come to feel like family reunions where the attendees are connected to each other by more than blood. They have become an opportunity to renew good friendships that have developed both online and in-person over the last year and a half.

The next Brokie gathering will occur in San Francisco the weekend of September 14-16. People are converging on the Bay Area to socialize, go to the Gay Rodeo in La Honda and the Rodeo Dance, take a City Guides Castro tour, and of course watch Brokeback Mountain at the Castro Theater on September 16. Original props and costumes from the film will be on display. Maybe I'll see you there. Yee Haw!

Pete Tannen is a retired transportation planner who worked as San Francisco's first Bicycle Program Manager for 14 years. Originally from New York, he's lived in the Bay Area since 1971 and has been with his partner David Cameron almost 30 years. When not going to Brokeback Mountain gatherings, he volunteers at Project Open Hand and the San Francisco Airport Museum. He can be reached at [ptannen@aol.com](mailto:ptannen@aol.com). He'll be happy to tell you all about the online and in-person Brokie communities and upcoming events.