

Is Palm Beach the ‘Closeted County?’

Many Residents Say they Need to be More Discreet

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When was the last time you saw a same-sex couple holding hands or giving each other a peck in the cheek? Well, apparently it depends on where you live. When I asked people in Broward County, they frequently said “I see that all the time.” But for those who live in Palm Beach County, more often the answer was “Never.”

However, many of those discreet Palm Beach County folks would then tell me that they have no problems “acting gay” during visits to Fort Lauderdale. “Because Lauderdale is different,” they say.

So why is it “different” up here? Why would some northern couples not feel the same freedom to put their arms around each other or to hold hands, as they do down south? And where are the rainbow flags here? How many gay newspapers are based in Palm Beach County? How many elected officials here are openly gay? Compared to other counties, is Palm Beach simply more closeted?

“Of course it is more closeted in Palm Beach County,” says Paul Lesnik, a licensed clinical social worker, who counsels a large number of gay clients in Palm Beach County. “You have heard

the saying, ‘When in Florida, the more North you go; the further South you are?’ Lesnik refers to the more-entrenched Southern (conservative) life-style that is found in the more-northern Florida counties. “Keep in mind that up until recently, there were very real reasons to fear disclosure as a homosexual here. For example, it was only last March that protections for LGBT students were enacted in our county schools. And employment non-discrimination went into effect just last year.”

It may have taken a while, but it seems that Palm Beach County government is completely supportive. The non-discrimination legislation protecting gays on the job was passed unanimously by all seven commissioners — Republican and Democrat.

Employment Discrimination

But that still doesn’t make Bryan Armario (not his real name) of West Palm Beach, comfortable enough to come out on his job. “There is no doubt in my mind that if officials knew for certain that I am gay, it would hinder advancement in my career. Although



he is out to family and some friends, Bryan believes that the attitudes of the Palm Beach County officials for whom he works keep him from feeling free to be himself. “I sometimes find myself considering giving up the career that I love, just to be more like my friends who are out at work.”

Changing jobs in order to be more honest may not be as easy as Bryan hopes. In Palm Beach County, there are fewer openly-gay customers, which means fewer openly-gay businesses, which means fewer openly-gay employers. At some point during employment with a presumably-heterosexual employer, the employee must still face the risk of coming out. This is one of the realities for those of us living in areas with less gay visibility.

Size Matters

So what causes this lack of gay visibility? “Broward is bigger,” people point out, “So they have more gay people.” Actually, Palm Beach County is bigger — with nearly twice the land size as Broward County. Broward does have more people — but only about 1/3 more. If gay people represent 10 percent of that difference (or is it five per-

cent, or two percent?), then the population count is really not that dramatic.

As a result of the different land size, however, the population there is more densely-populated in Broward than in Palm Beach. “I just don’t know any other gays out here,” is a common complaint. Apparently, it is much easier to feel isolated — and to remain closeted — when one believes they are the only homo for miles around.

Life Online: The Cyber Closet

So, if the only reason a person does not come out in Palm Beach County is because they don’t know any other gays, then life on the Internet should be different, shouldn’t it?

Searching a popular dating web site for gay men, however, shows that even on the Internet, Palm Beach County tends to be more secretive than Broward. A search for “Fort Lauderdale” and “West Palm Beach” brings up hundreds of profiles in both cities. More than half of the Lauderdale guys (53 percent) feature a photo of their face, compared to only 28 percent in West Palm Beach. On the other hand, quite a few of those faceless men in West Palm Beach had no problem in showing their genitals. That’s the funny thing about

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the “cyber-closet;” somehow it is preferable to be known as a faceless penis looking for a trick, rather than an openly-gay man looking for a relationship.

“It is not Easy to be the First”

Is it possible that the apparent stigma of coming out in Palm Beach county is more of a male thing? Is it easier for women?

Leslie Tipton has lived both in Palm Beach and Broward. She says “I would not feel any differently about kissing my girlfriend – should I have one – in a coffee shop here in Lake Worth than I would down in Fort Lauderdale. We should not have to worry about where hand-holding is ‘tolerated’ by others. Until we are willing to be true to ourselves – with appropriate public displays of affection everywhere – then we can’t expect society to change around us.”

Tipton acknowledges that is not easy to be the first. “No one should take chances with their own personal safety, of course. But, in the end, we should not have to be concerned with where the appropriate places might be for showing affection to a loved one.”

“Boss, I have a family thing to attend...”

Kerensa Butler of Boca Raton now openly shares her affection with a loved one. Before coming out, Butler recalls awkward situations at work that required some mental agility “I was tired of living a lie — censoring myself. On my first day at work, someone asked ‘Oh, I hear that you’re married. What’s your husband’s name?’ Since my girlfriend has a gender-neutral name, like ‘Pat’, I just mentioned her name. It wasn’t a lie or a fib, but I also did not correct the assumption that she was a he.”

Butler ultimately decided it was

time to come out to her employer, and she felt apprehensive. “My boss could have said, ‘You’re gay? You’re fired.’ So it was a real risk.” What happened when Butler walked into her boss’s office for the big announcement? Be sure to check back in the next issue to find out!

(Okay, sorry for the tease. Here’s a hint: She is still working there.)

In “Closeted County? Part 2,” we’ll hear about overwhelming community support for a struggling openly-gay organization, and a 22-year old explains why he lies to almost everyone he knows – just to avoid being called ‘gay.’ And, of course, what happened to Kerensa Butler, the Boca CPA when she came out to her boss?

Meanwhile, your comments, tasteful criticism and juicy rumors are always welcome. Please e-mail me at astephens@ourindependent.com