

What I'd like to talk about tonight is leadership, by bringing up some tragic examples of what happens when leadership betrays us, and what our responsibility, as individuals and as members of BWMT, should be when we our interests are victimized, rather than advanced, by those who call themselves our leaders.

I want to start by quoting one of the many self-appointed "leaders" of our community, a woman whose most recent claim to fame is that she is the former Secretary of the former Board of Directors of the former Eromin Center, who was recently quoted on the front page of the Philadelphia Gay News as condemning Philadelphia's gay men, saying that many will "fuck kids in our community but precious few will feed and clothe them."

Now, there's more than a little truth to that statement. It is, though, a little hard to take from one of the people responsible for actively destroying perhaps the most successful and important social service this community has ever created.

I bring it up, though, because I think it indicates something about where we are today. It's been fifteen years since the black and white men together at the Stonewall in New York City did their thing; ten years since some of us were beaten by the police in City Council chambers for demanding a gay rights bill; and less than two years after that bill was finally passed, with the support, I might add, of the father of one of the victims of that City Hall beating, who is now a member of City Council.

So as a modern movement, we are now nearly fifteen years old. And we have to deal with all the pains and the confusion of our adolescence. If nothing else, the quote I just read indicates the kind of anger and bitterness that is often associated with teenage years.

But I think, perhaps, we don't spend enough time recognizing what we've been able to accomplish in this city in that very short time.

We tend to forget the way it used to be.

We forget that in that time we've been able to overturn this state's eighteenth century sodomy statutes, which had for decades been used to harass, intimidate and imprison gay men from central Philadelphia to the suburbs of Erie.

We forget the days when parking near gay bars was always available because if you parked too close, the cops used to take down your license plate number before they went on one of their frequent raids.

We forget that just over ten years ago it was a common sight to see little dark cars pulling up outside of almost every gay bar in town in order to pick up the Mafia's percentage of the night's take.

We forget that it was this gay community, in the City of Brotherly Love, which led the national campaign to prevent our own Rev. B. Sam Hart from being appointed by President Reagan to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission--and that we went on to win one of the few victories that have been won against those people in Washington.

We forget that there was a time when you couldn't find a counselor or therapist or psychologist who didn't want to cure you; when the media would

only refer to us as "homophiles" when they were being nice and criminals when they weren't (and many of us thought of ourselves the same way); when you had to deal with police problems by talking to the vice cop in the patty wagon, not the Police Commissioner on an official city commission; when city politicians would not only be petrified at the thought of campaigning among gay people, but built careers on closing our gathering places down and putting us in jail.

We tend to forget these things partly because we're afraid they'll interfere with our experience of the relative openness we can enjoy today.

But I suggest that we also tend to forget these things because many of the arrogant people we have entrusted with our leadership, consciously and unconsciously, need us to. After all, if we were to really recognize what vision and courage have accomplished for us, we might expect these "leaders" or their, quote, "organizations" to exhibit the same kind of vision and courage. And that is a frightening prospect for those who, in the words of the "Dreamgirls" song, have "faked their way to the top."

The true fact is that much of the leadership of this community today doesn't even try to represent the myriad interests and concerns of the real gay and lesbian population of Philadelphia. No organization except this one has more than token non-white membership or leadership, despite the large non-white population of this city. Few of our "leaders" will really deal with the fact that it's their own capitulation and failure of vision that excludes broader community participation. It's much more simple to wrap

yourself in the armor of political correctness and spend your time power-tripping on everyone else.

So instead we find ourselves burdened with "community leaders" who equate constant fundraising for their salaries or their telephones or their rent with advancing the community's interests, while being unable to specify what progress the money will buy.

We see political leaders dedicating themselves with full force and energy to eradicating--not anti-gay prejudice, not our own examples of racism and sexism, not the failure of government to respond to our urgent needs for services like alcoholism treatment or health services--but rather devoting their energies to fighting other community leadership, to making sure that the ranks of those who call themselves leaders does not get expanded to include people of another sex or another race or another background.

We see gay religious groups limiting themselves to providing a safe haven for their congregations, but unwilling to offer, in any consistent way, the courageous Judeo-Christian social witness that their religious beliefs call for.

We see a gay press dominated by the most selfish, short-sighted and destructive kind of pseudo-journalism, dedicated to aborting new and creative leadership wherever it arises, and being responsive only to those their marketing strategists say have disposable incomes.

And we have recently seen many of the therapists--the people we look to to help gay men and women wounded emotionally by the pressures of a heterosexist society--banding together in an

orgy of self-destructiveness that destroys what was, only 7 months ago, the gleaming banner of our progress: the Eromin Center, a mental health facility owned and operated by and for the gay community itself.

A recent example of this self-abuse came up during the attempts to get Wilson Goode to fulfill his commitment to create a Commission on Sexual Minorities. You've probably heard KYW News say it's "building its reputation one story at a time; well, the Gay News seems to be trying to build its reputation by destroying one gay organization at a time. The publisher of that paper used all of the waning political influence he has to put obstacles in the way of that Commission, because he loses sleep over the prospect of other members of the community--especially blacks and women, and people who don't play the Center City Game-- having access to the people of influence he has never been able to reach on his own. And the leader of a group that calls itself the "only professionally staffed gay rights organization in Philadelphia" has done, and is still doing her best to undermine the unity and commitment that the Commission members are bringing to their task, because of the fear that if the Commission succeeds, we might not need her or her grant proposals anymore.

Why is that?

Why is it that it's made so difficult to feel what we have accomplished, and it's so easy to give up hope on accomplishing anything else?

Why is it that we are led to believe that we are rife with division and unable to clarify our agenda as a community?

Why is it that our gay press spends so much time informing us

what our so-called "leaders" are doing to each other, and so little on helping new leadership to the fore?

I think it's because our so-called "leaders" can't make the distinction between "leadership" and "self-promotion." And we the people let them get away with it.

It's my firm belief that in this city we have made more progress and gained more credibility as an important political constituency than has been accomplished anywhere else in this country, including San Francisco.

And, in most instances, we've done it with regular down-to-earth gay people doing their thing despite the efforts of our "leaders" to have us do something else.

You don't really know who got the sodomy statutes overturned because the people who won that battle did it to get it done, not to get accolades.

You don't really know who how the gay rights bill really got passed in this city because out of the hundreds of people involved in what was a five year process, only one of them has felt it necessary to capitalize on their involvement, and that primarily to make money off it in order to go on performing remarkably intangible services.

You don't really know who's responsible for our having the freedom to meet here openly tonight without fear of harassment, or arrest, or ruin, because it's not the result of any single individual or organization or strategy or plan. It's the result of gay men and women simply acting as themselves, simply being willing to say "no" to the things our gay predecessors could only suffer in silence.

And our real victories have happened when lesbians and gay men got together and ignored all the useless posturing that our so-called leaders torture us with, and just decided to take care of business themselves.

Since this movement began in Philadelphia we have made one step after another on a path of progress and greater freedom for our community, and no one can change that history.

But we run the danger of missing the chance to make future progress if we do not have the courage to reject the so-called leadership that has proven unable to lead, unable to even fathom the responsibility to the entire community that leadership entails--leadership that hinders and impedes our progress, that uses us to pursue personal, egotistical ends.

A case in point is what happened when our illustrious leader of the "fuck the kids" quote found herself allied with a large group of similarly-inclined so-called leaders and, together with them, created that orgasmic experience that has since become known as the "Eromin Controversy."

We urgently need to talk about and evaluate what happened to this community during that period.

Any of you who read the gay press or listen to the rumor mill know what has passed for the "facts" of the Eromin Controversy, and I won't try to depress you by repeating them. But how those of us who did not belong to the Eromin Center got to know about those "facts" is instructive about how some people interpret the "leadership" they've seized for themselves. And why we have been so powerless to stop this criminal act from occurring is something we must

not ignore. We have to stop dealing in vague impressions and start talking about the facts.

There's one fact that's being actively, and I think suspiciously, ignored, and which BWMT, if no one else, has to have the courage to confront: and that is that the only people who will really suffer from the abrupt destruction of the Eromin Center are poor people.

And the ones who will suffer the most are kids, the poor, young, disturbed, homeless--now, homeless-- and--oh, yeah, what a coincidence!--black kids who have now lost one of the very few chances for survival they ever had.

I say it's no coincidence that the people who are responsible for closing the doors on the Eromin Center were all white people.

I say it's no coincidence that they were all white people who aren't worrying about where their next meal is coming from or whether they'll still have their gentrified neighborhoods to go home to at night.

I say it's no coincidence that the people who paid Eromin for its counseling services will still be able to pay private therapists, and the Eromin Board is very helpfully making sure that those clients are referred, now that Eromin has been shut down, only to therapists who supported the Board's position while the Controversy was raging.

I say it's no coincidence that the therapists who volunteered their services to Eromin and turned over their fees (the people who decided to close Eromin) will still be able to charge those fees--though from now on they can keep the money all for themselves.

And I say it's no coincidence that those who don't

want to will no longer have to counsel those dirty little people who could only pay through their Medical Assistance cards--because Medicaid doesn't pay private practitioners of mental health services.

And I say it's no coincidence that the Philadelphia Gay News, which so vigorously threw into the gutter what little journalistic credibility it had left by producing a limp web of false rumor and pregnant implication under the guise of "investigative journalism," managed to sell a whole lot of newspapers--and, believe it or not, has opened us up to even further humiliation by submitting its articles for a Pulitzer Prize!

The publisher of the Gay News, in one of the most dishonest and vicious attacks on the gay community I have ever witnessed, took advantage of this most serious community crisis, to try to deceive this community into believing that the Eromin Center had become a nightmare place of financial wrongdoing and criminal malpractice. There were not, and still are not, any facts to bolster that contention, but that's of little concern to Mark Segal and his paid hatchet-people. The facts could not be permitted to get in the way of the personal vendetta that was under way.

No.

The gay community as Mark Segal and the Eromin people see it will still be OK.

Because the only gay community they care about will have the money and the access and, if you will, the color, to take care of themselves.

And this is progress, by the way. I know it is because I read it in the Gay News.

But who is speaking up for the ones who were made to suffer?

There are only three facts that can be discerned out of all the brouhaha and slander: the first is that Eromin was suffering from the same financial malaise that threatens all social service agencies in the age of Reagan, and the second is that its leadership, both before and after the controversy, did not have the vision or courage to do anything constructive about it. Why not? Why didn't they care enough?

Clearly, the problem was money, and that's hardly new. What was new was that Eromin's policymakers preferred to destroy it rather make even the minimal sacrifice of leadership: to try, at least, to come up with some kind of plan for solving the problem. I don't know about you, but I'm on every gay mailing list in town and am a fairly visible presence, but nobody asked me to join in any fundraising effort. And the effort to mediate the crisis and bring in new leadership with new vision was unilaterally rejected by the Eromin Board.

The third and most important fact--the one you won't read about in the Gay News-- is that the Eromin Center had to be destroyed because it represented a political power base that neither Mark Segal nor some of Eromin's leadership was willing to tolerate. And they were willing to sacrifice innocent people who urgently needed Eromin's services in order to pursue that destructive end. The fact is that many of the people responsible for closing Eromin will profit from its closing in both political and financial ways. And those who have never been allowed to share in the

leadership of this community are the primary victims.

And the way they kept the rest of the community from interfering, was by doing it all with the language of political correctness.

But I believe that if we really take the time to think about what our interests really are as a total community, and then analyze what we really know about what was going on at Eromin, we're forced to use some politically correct terminology of our own.

We're forced to call the closing of Eromin oppressive, because it mostly hurts those who are poor.

We're forced to call the closing of Eromin ageist, because it most helpless victims happened to be young.

We're forced^{to} call the closing of Eromin racist, because the youngest, most helpless, poorest victims also happened to be black.

But most frightening of all, even though the deed was done by gay leaders, we're forced to call it anti-gay.

We must call it anti-gay because, when you think about it, in Philadelphia, we've been able to take that one step after another on the path of progress ever since that police beating in City Hall in 1974, and we've passed progressive legislation while turning back one anti-gay law after another, we've gotten improved city services, especially around AIDS and STDs and mental health services, and we've roused from public office the people who made their careers by finding new and creative ways to make us and other minorities suffer, and we've only suffered one real defeat: the destruction of the Eromin Center. And Frank Rizzo didn't do it, B. Sam Hart

didn't do it, Melvin Floyd didn't do it, organized fundamentalist churches didn't do it, negative gay images in the media or the schools didn't do it, Ronald Reagan isn't even responsible for this one.

Our own gay leaders did it.

Lesbians and gay men blinded by the pride in their eyes and turned into the enemy by the selfishness in their hearts.

Lesbians and gay men who have done more to hurt us than all the homophobes in Philadelphia have been able to do in fifteen years.

And we are equally guilty if we don't see that for the betrayal of our trust that it is.

I bring all of this up here tonight because BWMT has not--at least not yet--fallen victim to the disease that has warped the perspective of so many others who claim the mantle of leadership in this city.

And BWMT is in a unique position to take up the challenge, the challenge I want to make to you tonight: to take the reins of leadership and move us all on to the next step.

In my view, this organization has the potential, and, if you will, the responsibility, to usher in a vibrant, new kind of community leadership: a leadership that recognizes that in the real world, there are issues more important than who gets the most attention as the "gay representative" of the week, or what the various power relationships between these self-appointed leaders are.

By beginning to directly confront racism in the Philadelphia gay community, BWMT has had the gall to point out that we don't have to look to school books or television documentaries to find dangerous

gay images--we can look much closer to home, in every corner, from the staff of gay bars to the membership of gay "organizations."

BWMT has had the effrontery to suggest that the cloning of poor neighborhoods--making them into safe havens for mostly white, mostly well-off, mostly racist, and mostly oh-so-proper gay men and lesbians--is evil, not liberation.

And BWMT has put the lie to the claim of virtually every other lesbian and gay community organization ever seen in this city--that it's impossible to be a gay group and have both white and non-white involvement--by showing that the way you do it is by doing something for both white and non-white gay people, by meaning something to both white and non-white gay people, and not just by talking about it, and not just by being politically correct.

I say that BWMT knows how to take care of business.

I'm not going to say that BWMT has not and will not suffer from some of the same problems. But it's fundamental philosophy, that black gays and white gays can work together on a common, progressive, and broad agenda, is a dramatic change from the way our community has allowed the Mark Segals and the other self-important types and the politically-correct to define us.

BWMT has dared to recognize that it takes more than a mailing list to have an organization. That it takes more than lip service to encourage broad community involvement. That it takes more than politically correct posturing in brochures and press releases to be politically correct.

I'm not sure that this organization is aware of it, but

as someone who has seen many gay organizations come and go over the years, I think that BWMT is on the right path. It's a different path. It's one that holds the promise of once and for all letting all of us know that the gay community is bigger and stronger than we've been led to believe. That our community is much larger than the coterie of mostly white activists that responds only to its own needs and its own imperatives. That it's all right to fight among one another when we have to but that it is the standard of what's best for the whole community, especially the most powerless among us, that really counts. That's what we should be about.

It's time for BWMT to recognize that no other organization has had the credibility to get involved in everything from the gay rights bill to AIDS work to gentrification to bar discrimination to the recent city elections to voter registration to virtually everything that's happened in Philadelphia for the past three years--except BWMT. And while it is still in its infancy, BWMT has already shown that it has the leadership and the foresight to know how to do it and how to move forward. And BWMT has shown that it can do these things without worshipping at the altar of selfishness that has so limited our progress.

There's still plenty to do within BWMT to move this organization forward. But I have no doubt that it can be done.

Because BWMT has had the practice, and a record, of making progress without selling its soul.

And that's a lesson that all of us need to take to heart.

Because we have lots to do.

We can aggressively take advantage of the opportunity that the new Administration in City Hall offers us, or we can squander it on fights for turf and frivolous gay pride proclamations.

We can reduce this new opportunity to simply a tool for the self-promotion of the more conceited among us, or we can use it to build new and visionary leadership that is appropriate to the community we really are.

The Bible says that the people cannot hear if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound. And Martin Luther King asked in response, "what is their hope if the trumpet makes no sound at all?"

I say we have let the trumpet fall into the wrong hands.

I say that this organization, and all of its members, has to have the guts to seize that trumpet away from those who have betrayed us and blast out a few notes of our own.

We have to stand up to the Mark Segals and permanently exorcise that brand of leadership that enriches itself on our pain.

We have to stand up to the guardians of the politically correct and tell them that now is the time they put some substance into that hot air or or we'll pop their balloons.

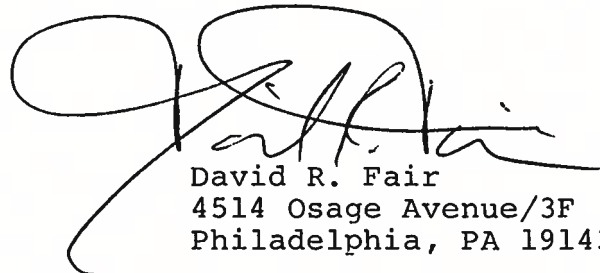
We have to have the courage and the wherewithal to stand against the kind of arrogant leadership that throws away vital social services with cynical, racist abandon, and show that that kind of leadership no longer mislead us, that we're no longer going to let them run the show.

Because we have lots to do.

And we intend to do it.

The urgency of the hour demands that we get out in front--and get down, to business.

Thank you.



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