

Eugene, Gender Roles & Culture Change

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According to research conducted by the Pew Research Center, about 70% of Americans believe homosexuality should be accepted by society. These days, being openly homophobic is, as the kids would say, “cringe”. Watching the videos on identity, especially “The Closet” and “Coming out”, makes the scale of the recent culture change regarding LGBT acceptance and gender roles shockingly apparent.

I have lived in the Eugene area my entire life, and my mom has lived in this area for 40 years. Neither of us had any idea this community of lesbians existed before I received this assignment. As I continued watching the interviews about co-ops and art collectives, I found myself wondering: how did our culture such that this community, seemingly, dissolved out of existence?

The section on “Lesbian Spaces” provides the beginnings of an answer:

“This rich lesbian geography ... began to fade as lesbians in Eugene won more rights and protections.”

This community arose because there needed to be a space where people could be safe from bigoted violence. Then, as the need for safe spaces lessened due to more widespread culture change, the members of these communities “took advantage of housing and employment protections, entered the public sector and professions, coupled and had children, and eventually married legally.” As the exhibit states. It is worth reflecting on the

loss of such a kickass community, but it is heartening to know that it happened for the right reasons, even in part.

The section on politics, then, describes the hard work that was required to enact this cultural change. It's disturbing to think that not too long ago (1977) two thirds of Eugonians voted to maintain the oppression of homosexual people, only then from Oregon to narrowly vote against equal rights as a whole in the late 80s. However, as stated by one of the presenters:

"I actually think the OCA, as hateful as they were, I don't think we'd be where we are today without them."

Anti-equality groups forced the lesbian community, and the LGBT community as a whole, to organize and come out, normalizing homosexuality, and slowly pushing public opinion towards acceptance. Then in 1992 a truly heinous law was rejected by the people and since then the trajectory of cultural change in regard to gender and sexuality has pointed towards equality.

Finally, the section on marriage brings home just how drastic the culture change has been. Despite marriage not starting out as a priority for the movement, the momentum towards equality was so great that the impossible dream of true marriage equality was realized.

In terms of gender roles, the biggest change explored by the Outliers and Outlaws exhibit is the idea that women *must* partner with men. By organizing and coming out this community of lesbians – and many others, made normal the idea that a woman can marry and love another woman.

There's more work to do to ensure these rights are not lost as culture continues to change, but it was wonderful to be reminded just how far we've come so quickly.

Sources

Homosexuality, gender and religion. (2017). Pew Research Center.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2017/10/05/5-homosexuality-gender-and-religion/>