

GAY COMMUNITY SERVICES CENTER  
1614 Wilshire Boulevard  
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SELF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Report for Staff Retreat, June, 1973

The Self Development Program consists of the personal or one-to-one counselling and various group activities, including rap, growth, and consciousness raising groups. The philosophy undergirding this program might be summarized under six headings.

1. It provides individuals with positive experiences of their gayness. In contrast to the typical experience in the heterosexually dominated society, where being gay is a source of shame, insult, compromise, hostility (i.e. oppression), the Self Development Program is designed to offer opportunities for individuals to experience their gayness as a source of pride, joy, wholeness, friendship (i.e. liberation).
2. It provides gay people with the opportunity to interact with each other as whole people. The social institutions in which we spend most of our time discourage or prevent gay people from being open about our sexuality. With those with whom we are open sexually, another set of factors has discouraged or prevented us from being open about other segments of our life. Our existence too often has been dichotomized, and one of the sorry consequences is that other gays are seen only as sources of sexual satisfaction. The Self Development Program recognizes the need for gays to be together in an ever wider range of things that people do in the course of a week so that we become whole people with each other.
3. It provides a challenge for us to explore the ways in which our gayness enters into and affects other areas of our life. The Self Development Program helps gay people interrelate the many segments of our existence into life styles which are meaningful and fulfilling.
4. It provides group settings where opportunities for growth are present. The Self Development Program makes available to gay people the insights and resources of the human potential movement. Social pressures have kept us alone and isolated. Even in our socializing places we are typically only strangers passing in a crowd. Group life is rare. At the Center our larger objective is to create a sense of community among those who make use of our services.
5. It provides trained people who work on a peer level with others. Counselling and leading groups have long been thought to be the province of a professional elite. Whether these professionals were also gay was less important than whether they were specially trained. The Self Development Program has reversed these priorities. Being gay does not guarantee success in a helping relationship, but our experience tells us that being a together gay person is the single most important ingredient in being able to help other gays. Therefore, we work with each other in a peer relationship. To increase the effectiveness of peer workers we have devised training programs for counsellors, rap leaders, and growth group facilitators, providing a new pool of trained people within the gay community.

6. It operates on a no-fee basis. When a person's relationship to an agency or to a worker in an agency is defined in such a way that he/she is the receiver and the agency/worker is the giver, it makes sense to charge a fee. This is the traditional pattern in service agencies. The patient-therapist relationship is one example. Relationships in the Self Development Program are not designed to be of this kind. We are interested, in contrast, in developing that atmosphere where each person is a giver as well as a receiver, where each person defines for him/herself the ways he/she will give and receive. Our goal is not to "treat" people and send them on their way better able to fend for themselves, but to invite each person to join our larger, on-going community in which we give to and take from each other. We are always in need of money, and people's voluntary contributions are always welcome, but other resources are equally vital, and people have many options for giving of themselves to the Center.

### Counselling

The Center's counselling program is not based on the medical model, which claims that people who do not measure up to certain standards of mental health are sick and need to be cured. Our point of view, instead, is that we are all struggling to find and use our whole and potential selves and to relate as fully and richly as we can to the world. We all sometimes have difficulty making choices and taking responsibility for the life we choose. The people who come for counselling are seen, like ourselves, as people who want help in clarifying and sorting out the available options. They, like we, are struggling to grow as gay human beings.

Our counsellors are encouraged to trust their own capacity to be human beings, to share themselves, to make themselves as available as they are comfortable with to people they see. They counsel by listening, clarifying, and experiencing together. They do not see their job as giving advice or direction to other people. When an issue is presented which for any reason stumps one counsellor, the person is referred to another counsellor or to one of the therapists or psychiatrists relating to our Center.

Counselling, therefore, is done by nearly every staff person. However, when a person asks specifically for help with a personal "problem", he/she is seen by the counselling staff. During the first 16 months, the Center had only a few people so designated. This was the last area in which we developed our own training program. Training consists of weekly, 2-hour meetings of those doing or wishing to do counselling. These people bring to the meetings for discussion those counselling experiences of their own where they are finding some difficulty and want help or where things are going particularly well and, because of that, serve as models for what can happen ideally. From time to time professionals are invited, especially those we use for referrals, to share themselves with us. The training is facilitated by the director of the program. Newt Deiter, a practicing therapist, also attends weekly and is available at any time for consultation to the counsellors.

The Center now has 18 people on its staff available for counselling, 8 men and 10 women. They typically see people once a week, over varying lengths of time, probably in the majority of instances five weeks of less. No accurate records were available before the last few months. During any one week about 25 people are seen in counselling. Since October of 1971 perhaps 500 people have been counselled at the Center.

In the vast majority of cases the "problems" presented are directly or indirectly related to gayness. A common situation is the person who is unsure whether he/she is gay. In most cases a more accurate statement would be that the person, given social sanctions, is unsure whether he/she should give expression to his/her gayness. Another common situation is the person who puts him/herself down for being gay. A host of difficulties stem from this starting point. In other cases a person might be shy or have difficulty in keeping friends because he/she has carefully learned to hide important segments (those that relate to being gay) from others. I saw one case of impotence which had this dynamic at its roots. Typically problems experienced by couples also stem from unresolved issues centering around being gay. Dealing with gay identity is a focal point for the resolution of most difficulties presented to our counsellors.

Counselling at the Center allows the counsellor to turn the people they are seeing onto a wealth of programs as they are ready to take advantage of them. Simply coming to the Center for counselling exposes the person in counselling to other gays who are having good times together and to the realization that gay people are organizing for their mutual benefit. This exposure to the larger community has often been missing in therapist-client relationships, and is one of the most valuable aspects of our counselling.

Our basic procedure is as follows. An initial (intake) interview is conducted for men by Dick Nash and for women by Betty Taylor. Then, on the basis of their knowledge of this person and of the counsellors, they match the two to maximize the chances of a profitable relationship. We try to see drop-ins when they appear and set up appointments for those who call. Simple records are kept by the counsellor and returned to the administrative office after the person has been seen for the last time.

#### Gay Awareness Rap Groups

One of the earliest activities begun at the Center was the rap group. Only a handful of men showed the first night, some 19 months ago. Since then, with announcements in the underground papers and word of mouth, the rap groups have become our single most popular activity.

It was in this area that the issue of how men and women in the Center would relate early arose. The first groups, planned by men, attracted only men. A few women decided raps for women were needed too, but separately and on a different night. Mens' raps were begun on Mondays, womens' on Thursdays, and both continue on those nights at the present time. Later a mixed (men and women) rap was started, with mixed leadership, on Wednesdays, and this also continues. The womens' program grew so rapidly that an additional night--Tuesday--was added last fall. There is also a youth rap on Fridays, but this has never formally been considered a part of the Self Development Program.

The womens' rap program, which has diversified with time, will be reported on separately by Lillene Fifield, who gives coordination to it. The Wednesday mixed rap has always attracted a large majority of men. Like the other groups, its numbers have fluctuated from time to time, but on the average has been smaller than the separate raps. Its leadership, however, has changed less than either of the others.

The mens' raps now have from 70 - 90 people on an evening. There are enough leaders and rooms to divide into smaller groups, after which people come back together for a social hour with coffee in the community room. Usually there are

five groups with an average of 15 or slightly more per group. Typically some of these smaller groups are specialized. Most weeks there is a new-comers group. Often there is a non-verbal group. Always there is at least one general rap. From time to time special groups are offered around such topics as aging, coming out, creative talent, etc.

During the 19 month's operation, the turnover in rap leaders has been extensive. We now have 29 rap leaders on the staff, 11 men and 15 women. Two levels of training have been offered. On most weeks, a half hour or an hour before the rap session is set aside for rap leaders to share and profit from their on-going experiences in leading rap groups. Earlier in the spring we organized an integrated (man and women), 8-week, one-night-a-week training program led by Myra Riddell, a social worker in psychotherapy. The group of 10 proceeded as a rap group, dealing with issues in leadership as they emerged. Participants spoke well of the program. We have tried to repeat it, and even though Myra was willing, her health has prevented it. The demand for rap leader training is large, and we must find an alternative soon.

Basic to the rap groups is the idea that they are an opportunity for participants to speak. They are encouraged to share ideas with each other. The raps are not lecture platforms where outsiders are invited to speak. Only on rare occasions are guests invited to start the ball rolling with a presentation of their own. Each person is free to say anything on his/her mind that relates to being gay. It is an informal, non-pressured atmosphere, where people are free to participate as little or as much as they wish (consistent with everybody's having a chance to speak). The experience is particularly helpful to the newcomer or the shy person who would prefer to wait and get to know others before contributing. On the other hand, people are reminded that what they gain from these groups will depend on how much of themselves they finally put into the group. We have also been firm about the idea that the raps are not a place for observers with notebooks in hand who are doing research or a term paper. We want nothing to inhibit the freedom that gay people expect to express themselves openly with other gay people.

Some participants continue to come over a long period of time, especially on Thursday and Wednesday nights. More come for shorter periods of time and then drift out or into other Center activities. Rap groups offer the first experience of the Center to probably a majority of the people who use it. The original purpose of increasing or heightening one's awareness as a gay person is appreciated by most people who come. However, some come primarily to meet new people, seeing the Center as only a better place than the alternatives for cruising. The majority probably combine these two reasons for coming. Adding the attendance of each evening since October, 1971, I estimate that the total would be between 11,000 and 12,000 people. The total number of different people who have participated in the gay awareness rap program is probably nearer 6,000 to 7,000.

#### Growth Groups

The Center's growth groups are the most direct way we try to make available the techniques being discovered by the human potential movement for releasing more of a person's potential. These groups focus on interpersonal relations as a way of learning more about self and trying new styles of relating. This approach emphasizes learning through experience, rather than by head tripping

only. The members of the group concentrate on the interaction between themselves, which is to say on what is happening at that moment in that place.

In an atmosphere of trust, each person becomes more free to be open and honest about his/her feelings. A combination of structured exercises and free sessions encourage people to ask such questions as: How do I feel about myself? Do I know and am I in touch with that? How do I feel about the other people around me? Can I let them know and do I have the tools to do so? How do they feel about me? Am I interested and do I know how to find out?

The facilitator's function is to assist the interaction and the process of learning from it, not to lecture, to analyze, or to tell people how to change. Each person, using the feedback from the interaction, can decide where he/she wants to move with it.

Growth groups are composed of about 10 people and, once constituted, are closed to allow the same people an opportunity to work together. They meet 2 hours, one night a week, over an 8-week period of time. Most of our groups have been all men or all women. The demand for mixed groups has appeared, and we now offer these as well, but only one such group has gotten off the ground. Eventually, if there is demand for mixed gay/straight groups, they will be added also. As of now, 18 months after the program's inception, we have had 48 groups (37 for men, 8 for women, 2 for under-21-year-olds, and 1 for men and women) with about 400 different people having participated.

After the first group, people can repeat the experience with another group. Several facilitators are trained to lead advanced groups, which is another option given those who finish their first group, but so far only three such groups have been formed.

Until recently none of the exercises we used encouraged group members to focus on their gayness as such. They had more to do with human qualities. We have now introduced a new exercise which gets people to deal with their own feelings about their gayness and how it makes others feel about them.

Each group is led by a gay facilitator who has been trained by the Center (in a coeducational program). We designed our training program in cooperation with Betty Berzon, well known in this field, who still works closely with it. The initial facilitators were picked for their high level of gay consciousness. Our policy now is for an applicant to begin in a growth group and then to go through a competitive selection process in which he/she is evaluated in terms of how available he/she makes him/herself to the group process (our understanding of what leadership means here). Training begins with a weekend encounter followed by 6 weekly sessions on the style of leadership we use. We've offered four training programs in cooperation with Betty for regular facilitators, one for leaders of advanced groups, and one in cooperation with Janet Rainwater on gestalt and with Margo Robinson on bioenergetics. Due to poor planning, this last session did not include our regular facilitators nor did it add any facilitators to our ranks. We currently have 31 growth group facilitators on our staff (including 10 just finishing training), 12 women and 19 men.

We have never advertised the growth groups outside the Center. Now that we have so many facilitators available, plans have been set in motion to advertise in the papers which reach the gay community. We might also be in a position at last to respond to requests, especially from nearby college groups, to furnish facilitators outside the Center. The size of this program might increase rapidly in the near future.

Two studies on our growth groups have been done by Steve Berman. His evaluation indicates that they have very successfully achieved their goals, as judged by the participants themselves. Steve and Betty Berzon have written an article on our groups, soon to be published in the Journal of Humanistic Psychology. Betty also has an application pending for funds from the National Institute on Mental Health to do a study on gay growth groups, using our Center as the laboratory.

#### Consciousness Raising Groups

The Center has had only one group, for women, and it is reported on separately by Mina Robinson and Sharon Raphael.

#### General Observations

1. There is some overlap in the staff between the various divisions of the program. We have a total of 54 people, most of them working varying degrees of part-time, at the moment. This number varies almost daily, however, as some leave and others are added. The total number of people who have functioned as staff in this area since our inception would easily be doubled. The turnover does not disturb me. In one way or another the experience gained at GCSC is being made available to the gay community, whether or not it continues to be offered through GCSC.

2. I believe it is important that all staff--especially Self Development staff--have a working knowledge of what's happening in the several areas of Self Development. One of the larger challenging questions is how does the staff person who has first contact with a newcomer turn him/her onto the many resources of the Center. This is what is different about our Center: that gay people can know and interact with each other at so many different levels. If one person has not experienced the rap groups or the growth groups, for example, is he/she going to be in a position to turn others onto them? It is essential, at least for our counsellors, to know these groups intimately because they so often are the activity which crystallizes a problem which a person brings to the counsellor. Repeatedly I am able to be more helpful than I otherwise would be because I understand the context (a particular growth group exercise, for example) out of which a problem being presented to me has emerged, even when the person doesn't understand the situation well enough to verbalize it.

3. I cannot overstress the importance the training programs have been to the Self Development Program. Enhancing peoples' natural skills is only one part of it. They have also been crucial in building a sense of teamwork--being part of a larger group working together with common goals. This, in turn, builds commitment and ensures that people will be with us longer. Finally, the training programs have given us the nucleus of community, which is the larger goal toward which all our activities strive. A staff which has a sense of community among its members is in a better position to invite others who use the Center to join that growing, developing community we have at the Center. Allowing for improvements in any area, I believe our training for counsellors and growth group facilitators is basically on the right track. I see the need for strengthening training for rap leaders. I'm hopeful that all rap leaders will eventually be graduates of our Institute for Gay Awareness.

4. One of the perplexing questions at the Center has to do with the interaction of men and women. The programs within the Self Development area are largely separate at the moment. The mixed raps and growth groups have not caught on. That does not disturb me because I believe this is what is desired by most men and even more women at this stage. The reasons behind this desire are preponderantly healthy, I also believe. It should be noted, however, that all our training programs have been integrated. My own analysis says that men and women will be able to work together comfortably when we can come as equals to each other and when we have common agendas to work around. The Self Development Program has offered some common agendas in our needs for trained staff. It has also offered men and women separately the chance to develop programs, build expertise, and accumulate a record of service. When we each come to the other out of a background of equal experience, equality is possible. The area at the Center where women and men are working most comfortably is probably the Self Development Program.

5. Reading this report should help people understand why we have the policy of inviting only gay people to be on our staff. The policy comes out of our special needs as gay people. We need positive models of people who are comfortable with their gayness. We need people who share our oppression and our ecstasy at being gay. We need people with whom we can be whole, which means with whom we can sleep as well as work, rap, and socialize. The gay community lacks leadership and the Center has the challenge to train gay people and to give them the opportunity to exercise their talents in leadership roles. Gay people have different priorities than non-gays. This is illustrated by the expectations of many non-gays that gay-straight dialogues should have a high priority. This is not consistent with the philosophy of the Self Development Program.

6. I have hinted at the fact that our counselling takes on a unique flavor because it's done in the context of a gay community center. This is one of the most important contributions being made by our Center. As the full advantage of this arrangement becomes understood, there will be less and less counselling of gay people outside this setting. The Center needs to speak much more loudly about this area of our work so more people will understand the significant contribution we are making. I'm planning to develop my thoughts in this area in the next paper I write.

7. The majority of people come to our Center, not out of a need for help, but out of a desire to be with other gay people with whom they can have a good time. This leads me to believe there will always be a need for centers in the gay community and that it is not our objective to work ourselves out of business. The content of our programs might change, but we're here for good. That is a fact to celebrate, not lament.

8. Our experience since October of 1971 has been so enlightening and so revolutionary, that it should be shared much more widely than it now is with other gay centers around the world. I would hope that the channels of communication with other centers could be opened, expanded, and better coordinated. I would like to see us move this item up on our list of priorities now that we have been involved in our experiment as long as we have.

Richard Nash, Director  
Self Development Program  
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