
Boston Asian Gay Men and Lesbians

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Newsletter

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A Look Back: BAGMAL at South Cove

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Ever since its beginnings in the summer of 1979, BAGMAL has grappled with the question of reaching out to the local Chinese community in Boston's Chinatown. While most of the members of BAGMAL were from outside Boston, many being middle-class professionals or college students with few local ties, some have worked professionally in the Chinatown community while at least one member grew up in that community. All of us however regardless of our actual connections with local Asian communities have always felt that BAGMAL should establish a presence among the local Asian communities so that local Asian gay people such as in Chinatown who were coming out or who wanted to reach out to other Asian faggots and dykes could find a supportive and welcoming environment. At the very least it was our hope that by publicizing the existence and availability of a group like BAGMAL, the presence of gay people of Asian descent could no longer be denied or ignored by the local Chinese community. This can in turn help break down the isolation felt by many still-closeted Asian gays, that feeling of being the only Chinese/Japanese/Korean faggot or dyke in the neighborhood that many of us in BAGMAL remember only too well from our past.

This is an account of an early effort by BAGMAL to forge some ties with individuals and institutions in Boston's Chinatown. While not much has been done since this initial attempt, an account of the effort may provide valuable insights for further initiatives to build contacts and connections.

Initial contact with local Chinatown institutions had been made right from the BAGMAL's earliest beginnings. While trying to recruit members in 1979, founding members had been referred to the Director of the Mental Health Division of the South Cove Community Health Center, the medical service organization serving the Chinatown community. The Director, an intelligent and affable woman in her 30's, had done counselling for the Homophile Community Health Service before and was familiar with gay people and their issues. She had had occasion to counsel Chinese gay men at South Cove and expressed frustration at the lack of supportive structures for Asian gay people; she welcomed the formation of BAGMAL. Flyers and pamphlets about the group were left with her and at the South Cove, and on bulletin boards in the Community Center housing the Health Center, but no further contacts were made with either South Cove or its Mental Health Director for a few years. The few early members of BAGMAL concentrated on building the organization and recruiting from among Asian fags and dykes who were already out and moving around the gay/lesbian community.

Almost two years later, in the fall of 1981, a larger and more active membership looked again to making contact with the Chinatown community. Contact was again established through the South Cove Health Center and again through the Director of its Mental Health Division. The position however was no longer held by the same person contacted by BAGMAL before so the earlier rapport was essentially lost. Fortunately, the new Director was equally enthusiastic about the group. Initial contact led to a dinner meeting with about 8 BAGMAL members, men and women, at which a presentation by BAGMAL to the staff of the Health Center was suggested by the Director. The occasion was to be an in-house training session for the South Cove staff at which BAGMAL members were to be invited to address the issue of homosexuality among Asian men and women. The meeting with the Director left those present with a favorable impression of him. He appeared sincere and genuinely

interested in wanting to know about us, not just as clinical cases but as individuals with whom he could share ideas and find a common ground.

The date having been set, BAGMAL members set out to prepare for the presentation. The time of the talk - a weekday morning - and the visibility involved narrowed the number of people willing to be the speakers. Fortunately of the two who volunteered, one was Lester, who had grown up in Chinatown which all felt was a big plus in bringing "home" the message, "gay people exist in your midst". I volunteered to be the other speaker, having been involved in the contacts with South Cove two years earlier. Unfortunately, none of the lesbian members were able to make the presentation. Although only two people were to address the South Cove staff, the preparation for the talk was a collective effort in which input and ideas were contributed by many who felt (rightly) that it was an important step that BAGMAL was about to make.

It was obvious from the start that we would not be facing a hostile audience. These were professionals we were to address - health workers, medical personnel, psychologists and social workers. There was apprehension, of course, that we might be looked upon as clinical case studies - as textbook cases of homosexual mental health clients. More ominous was the thought of "coming out" to a large group of Chinese people that one did not know. In my case the thought that I would be facing men and women who would be very much like my aunts and uncles, or childhood friends and their families brought to mind the prejudice and rigidity of traditional Chinese Confucian families; surely these people were supposed to be liberal human service professionals, but long-term cultural conditioning dies hard. In Lester's case, of course, the sense of returning to his "roots" and coming out to the community in which he grew up was very real indeed.

In our brainstorming sessions we tried to define and narrow our objectives. We saw our role as conveying to the staff some basic facts about homosexuality as well as some of the particular perceptions and experiences of Asian homosexual people. We were conscious that we needed to articulate the concerns of Asian lesbians and especially to emphasize that Asian lesbians do exist - this to offset the absence of lesbians among the speakers. The audience being health and social service providers, we saw ourselves sensitizing them to some of the needs of homosexual men and women, especially those who might still be closeted. In a more long-term sense, we saw the talk as the beginning of a relationship with the Health Center whereby the staff may be encouraged to disseminate and channel information about BAGMAL to those whom they knew may benefit from knowing about us. In this regard, we planned to bring along our pamphlets and specifically included information on the history, objectives and make-up of BAGMAL in our talks. In a more general sense we saw this presentation as beginning to build bridges into the Chinatown community, a rather modest beginning no doubt - giving a talk to social service professionals - but a beginning nonetheless.

Though Lester and I felt reasonably prepared to deliver our 10 minute speeches and to handle questions, we were not prepared for an audience that was almost 90% women. Of about 50 to 60 people present only about 5 were men. Most present looked in their 20's and 30's. Certainly there did not seem to be anyone over 50 in the room. All present were Chinese. The atmosphere seemed casual, somewhat akin to a morning staff coffee break. The audience sat or stood along three sides of a rather bare, classroom-like room. Lester and I were introduced and proceeded to give our prepared speeches. Meanwhile, several women passed around pieces of paper where the audience could write their questions. The medium of exchange was English.

From my notes for the talk, I recall that I took pains to emphasize the diversity of gay people, the particularities of individual experience and then went on to familiarize the audience with some of the experiences common to gay people. I described homophobia, the experience of "being in the closet" as a response to homophobia and then proceeded to talk about the gay liberation movement, its ideas, goals, its impact on the consciousness, self-esteem and collective strength of gay people. I provided personal details - early sexual feelings, crushes in high school and college, and the peculiar limbo of being caught between close friends and family who were Chinese but "straight" and a gay community which I once perceived as monolithically white and middle-class. Lester gave a similarly personal account describing his leaving the Chinatown community as a result of coming out, his relationships

with parents and siblings. I closed with a short explanation of why no BAGMAL lesbian members were present. I emphasized that in addition to homophobia, Asian lesbians had to deal with the pressures of traditional roles expected of Asian women; I hinted that these pressures could explain why more Asian women do not come out.

The questions were fairly predictable - do gay people have stable relationships, how do we relate to family and relatives, were we out at work. One woman asked whether we might ever wish to raise children. Lester answered in the affirmative while I said that I could not stand children. This latter remark brought laughter and applause from many people. Obviously, Chinese gay men and lesbians were not the only people who felt the pressures to marry and reproduce the tribe. Some spontaneous remarks were revealing. One woman who looked in her 30's was quite emphatic that we had to reach children in order to combat homophobia at an early and impressionable age. On the other hand, another woman said very honestly that she still felt that the family was most important. She expressed understanding of our positions but said that she personally would not like her children to be influenced by people like us because we made homosexuality seem too attractive.

After the talk several people came up to speak to us. All were friendly, supportive, direct. I had a sense that our personal accounts of growing up alienated struck a responsive chord, especially among the younger single people of the same generation as Lester and me. One person for example remarked that our honesty about sexual feelings was refreshing as Asian peoples are often so reticent about talking about sexuality.

On the whole, we felt the experience was positive and that we made an impact. This was confirmed by insiders who informed us that we were the subject of much discussion at South Cove for quite a while after the presentation. Most of the staff were impressed by us although some apparently said they felt pity for us. (Had we set too somber a tone and left out some of the pride?) For many apparently, it was the first time they had (knowingly) come across gay men. Most importantly, many felt that had white gay people given the presentation, they would have again easily shrugged off homosexuality as a phenomenon peculiar to white people. Our being Chinese "like them" obviously caused many to rethink their pat assumptions and reconsider their prejudices.

From this experience, it seems quite clear that liberal, middle-class folk like those at the Health Center are fairly receptive to gay people. Some could even connect the oppression of homosexuals with their own experiences with racist stereotyping and their sense of alienation from white society. One man, for example, came up to discuss with us how gay people dealt with their portrayals by the media - this to compare with his own efforts at challenging the stereotyping of Asian people.

In retrospect, it seems a pity that we did not continue to pursue our ties with South Cove. There is of course a limit to what can be done with middle-class professionals - albeit community-oriented ones. Nevertheless maintaining organizational ties and some personal ones as well could have helped us to establish some of the "presence" in the community that we had decided was one of BAGMAL's goals.

One final happy outcome of our encounter with the South Cove was that we gained two new members. They were staff at the Health Center, people who were already out in the gay and lesbian community and had heard of BAGMAL but had yet to check us out. Our presentation at the South Cove convinced them that BAGMAL was worth looking up.



✉ In the Mail Bag ✉

A new issue of CELEBRASIAN from the Gay Asians of Toronto with photos of their Gay Asian "Celebrasian" Show. Also interview with a White-Chinese couple and news.

Asian Lesbians of the East Coast also sent us a copy of their new magazine. Features poetry, artwork, essays including one on the portrayal of Asian women in Hollywood movies.

Another Pacific Brid(g)e, also newsletters from Asian/Pacific Lesbians and Gays and Black/White Men Together, New York.

- We received news that an Asian gay group is forming in Chicago.

The State of our Organization

Okay, so you've gotten this far in the newsletter. Like it? Want to see more?

After a pitiful turnout to the last meeting on September 23, we're wondering whether it's time to rethink BAGMAL's future directions. Should we have meetings quarterly? Suspend them altogether? Keep contact through this newsletter exclusively? Where do the interests lie in our membership? Is our membership totally disinterested? Do we still have a membership?

Thus, our idea for the questionnaire enclosed. We thought up 21 possible discussion questions about which we'd like you to express your opinion--you can check more than one box in the categories indicated. Also, what would you like to see in future BAGMAL gatherings? We've listed some potential ideas; feel free to add your own.

Please please *please* send them back to us before the party. If you're feeling generous, here's another request for donations--\$5.00 is a good sum. Carolyn's getting nervous thinking about postage and copying costs. Just how much can she slip off on the company and get away with?

And finally, the party. Yep, another BAGMAL party, thanks to Lester and the Paradise. In case you missed the invitation, it's on December 9, from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m. The party's a chance for us all (friends, too) to get reacquainted, find out who our friends are, and see everybody in an informal setting. Mark it on your calendar. And be there.

One thing about the party: because it's a reintroduction of sorts, please only invite friends that are *sincerely* interested (either in BAGMAL or you). Five such friends is the suggested maximum. But please do try to show up--remember, it's a party, not a meeting.

