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Lovers without borders

by Rachel Gold
 Special to Q-Notes

In an increasingly global society, more and more people are involved in an international romance. Because gays and lesbians can't marry, international same-sex couples are often split between their two countries, travelling back and forth as much as their visas and bank accounts permit.

The Internet has given us an inexpensive way to communicate internationally.

On the bright side, we can build alliances, support GLBT people in repressive countries, and learn about travel opportunities like World Pride. The downside, if you can call it that, is that we can now fall in love with someone halfway around the world.

At the risk of encouraging relationships, I recommend netizens participate in the international GLBT movement. In the US we often tend to forget that we're not the center of the world. Being in touch with citizens in Canada and the Netherlands shows us how far we have yet to go in our own struggle; and communicating the people in Lebanon or Namibia allows us be grateful for what we have and challenged to support others.

One great way to stay up to date on international GLBT news is to subscribe to the mailing list Queerplanet. To subscribe to Queerplanet, send mail to: majordomo@abacus.oxy.edu. In the mail message, enter only the words: "subscribe queerplanet."

This new international access is not without its dangers, especially for gays and lesbians living in repressive cultures. In late September, the Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org) and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (www.iglhrc.org) publicized the plight of two Lebanese citizens brought to military court. They face three months to three years in prison.

"This reflects increasing intolerance by the

government," said Hanny Megally, executive director of the Middle East and North Africa division of Human Rights Watch. "Access to the Internet is an integral part of the right to free expression. And Internet service providers such as Destination should not be liable for Internet content."

"As part of a broader campaign to increase its censorship and control over the Internet, the Lebanese government has targeted a vulnerable and unpopular group (lesbians and gays) but the prosecution of Mr. el Batal and Mr. Mugraby shows that everyone's rights are at stake and no one should stand by idly," said Kamal Fizazi, IGLHRC Regional Program Officer for Africa and Southwest Asia.

In the next few years, most countries will find that they can't afford to limit their citizens' access to the Internet. Such a move keeps them behind the times and makes them an undesirable target for international investors. In the mean time, look for more struggles around control in conservative countries.

A funny twist on repressive government came in the recent cancellation of the Belarus Pride Festival. In Minsk, the festival, scheduled to take place during the first weekend in September, was cancelled after the first hour because organizers did not have permits. The Belarus Lambda League (BLL) accused authorities of banning the festivities, but other Russians gays are accusing the organizers themselves. They charge that organizers failed the festivities on purpose to raise more money for their organization. As rumors about the failure grew, the webmaster of the BLL site www.minsk.irex.by/-gayforum) called for an independent investigation, the site was shut down. Opponents charge that the failure of the festival was better for BLL because it drew sympathetic attention to the plight of gays and lesbians in Belarus. (For more on this debate see the excellent site www.gay.ru.)

This is a new dynamic for organizations in countries where gays and lesbians are not as well off as in the US. They can draw our attention and contribution through emailed action alerts.

This connectivity is also creating more international GLBT events. Recently the Mayor of Tel Aviv, Israel, gave his approval to a World Gay Pride event in his city. Mayor Ron Huldai met with members of Agudah (www.glb.org.il, or in Hebrew: www.eilati.co.il/all/main.htm), a GLBT group, and congratulated them on the idea of hosting a World Gay Pride Day in Tel Aviv. He also joked with them that they should remember there are only 7,000 hotel rooms in the city.

Agudah Director General Luba Fein said, "We told him that the visiting tourists would be happy to share their hotel rooms and shower together, and he laughed." The date for that Gay Pride Day will be June 22, 2001.

A great way to be involved in the international GLBT scene is to visit the IGLHRC site every few weeks and read their globe-spanning action alerts. In case you fall in love with someone from another country, you may also want to visit the Lesbian and Gay Immigration Rights Task Force at www.lgirtf.org.

Until same-sex marriage makes it obsolete, we must do what we can to keep loving couples together regardless of political borders. ▼

[Send comments or responses to this column to editor@q-notes.com. If you have ideas or questions about technology and the Internet that could be used in future columns, email Rachel at MailePlay@aol.com.]

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