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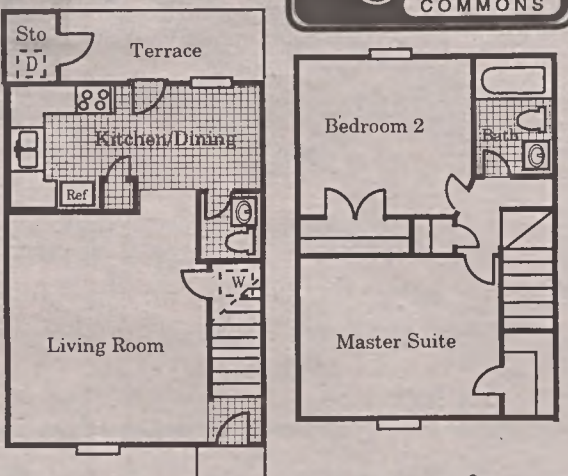
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glaad notes

by the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

Compulsory heterosexuality

In its September issue, *Harper's* magazine re-examined the Matthew Shepard murder from a provocative new angle. Rather than focusing on the sexual orientation of the victim, frequent *Harper's* contributor JoAnn Wypijewski looked closely at the sexual orientations of the killers and the environment that may have helped shape them.

Wypijewski's excellent in-depth look at the culture of "compulsory heterosexuality" defies easy categorization — it neither demonizes Shepard's killers nor does it venerate their victim, choosing instead to look at the history, character and culture of Wyoming and the social forces that simultaneously buckle under the weight of and reinforce institutionalized homophobia.

In language showing some disdain for the tepid concept of "tolerance," Wypijewski examines the pressure to conform to masculine heterosexual norms — a pressure she believes not only causes homophobia, but also damages heterosexual men. "Among the tolerance peddlers, it's always the 'lifestyle' of the gay guy," she writes, "never the 'lifestyle' of the straight guy or the culture of compulsory heterosexuality." She proceeds to quote a University of Wyoming student in a discussion with a woman opposed to violence, but who was convinced that homosexuality is immoral. "The issue isn't tolerance," he said. "We don't need to learn tolerance; we need to learn love."

For Wypijewski, love is not just an abstract concept. Rather, it is "life's defining line," one held firm by "all the little things of a culture, mostly unnoticed and unremarked, like the way in which the simplest show of affection is a decision about safety, like the way in which a man entwined with a woman is the stuff of everyday commerce, but a man expressing vulnerability is equivalent to a quaint notion of virginity — you save it for marriage." Ever fearful of the stigma of homosexuality, the article

suggests that heterosexual men escalate their isolating culture of masculinity until homophobia consumes them.

In this outstanding, complex piece of journalism, Wypijewski constructs a story that works on multiple thematic levels; one which compellingly suggests that the way to eradicate homophobia is to reconceive a heterosexuality now broken by fear of same-sex male emotional intimacy.

Thank *Harper's* magazine for publishing this vital, remarkable feature. Contact: Lewis H. Lapham, Editor, *Harper's* magazine, 666 Broadway, New York, NY 10012; email: letters@harpers.org.

Focus on gay youth

ABC News' *20/20* opened its 1999-2000 season with an extensive segment called "Throwaway Teens" that examined the plights of three homeless gay youths thrown out of their homes due to their sexual orientation. The segment began with the image of a young man walking and a voiceover: "He spends his days going nowhere," intones correspondent Connie Chung. "Barely visible to the people he passes, he matters to no one. [H]e is homeless, fending for himself, far from anything he ever knew."

Chung explains that the youth, Daniel, "is certain that he was thrown out [of his family's house] because he is gay...sent on his way without tears, without even a goodbye." Forced to find livelihood, Daniel admits that he has turned to prostitution during rough times. In the end, he says, "I miss my home. I'd like to tell my mom and my family that I love them and that I wish that they would accept me for who I am and just love me again."

At times, the segment seemed needlessly sensationalistic — with gritty and blurred street footage and one teaser which broke to commercial with a description of these youth as "so young and struggling to survive...the price of being gay." Also, despite passing references to the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center and a brief camera tour of the Hetrick-Martin Institute (HMI), the general tone of the piece seemed almost hopeless: comments selected from interviews with HMI Executive Director Verna Eggleston were insightful and apropos, but focused on the plight and not the solution.

As the first substantial foray into this topic by any major television program, it is understandable that *20/20* emphasized the under-covered dilemmas of this community. The piece's overall intention was certainly laudable, and producers were most successful in bringing understanding of the problem and sympathy for the plight of youth like Daniel, Ginger and Ron. Furthermore, the youth themselves were the focus of the piece, given the opportunity to speak out in their own voices — something that happens all too rarely in the media.

Since 1992, *20/20* has won three GLAAD Media Awards — more than any other television news program. The show's producers have clearly committed themselves to excelling in their coverage of an extremely diverse set of topics.

Let the folks at *20/20* know you appreciate their coverage and urge them to do a follow-up — to show the hopeful side that really does exist. Contact: Victor Neufeld, Executive Producer, *20/20*, 147 Columbus Ave., New York, NY 10023; fax: (212) 456-0533; email: 2020@abcnews.com. ▼

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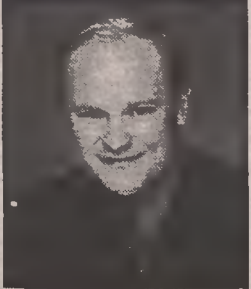
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