TV Teaches Homophobia, Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men Increases

by Eliza Randall

A discussion entitled "Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men" evaluated the negative portrayal of gays and lesbians in the media and considered how this portrayal may be contributing to the increased violence against gays and lesbians.

The event, which was held on April 11 in the James Room of Barnard Hall, featured Matt Foreman and Robert Varquez of the NYC Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, and Karin Schwartz of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD).

The event was sponsored by Take Back the Night and the Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Coalition (LBGC).

The NYC Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project was founded in 1982, and has its offices at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center downtown, in the West Village. One of their main tasks is gathering statistics of violent crimes, especially those which are bias-related, i.e. anti-gay or anti-lesbian. They use statistics to help push for legislative goals, to effect census laws, and to advocate treatment to survivors of attack.

The Project also provides counseling for survivors of bias-related violence and domestic violence within the gay and lesbian community.

Schwartz opened the evening by discussing GLAAD's role in another area, reforming the media. GLAAD contends that gays and lesbians can and should be portrayed truthfully in the media, and not be used to sensationalize news.

Schwartz pointed to television as one aspect of the media. She examined how it contributes to the invisibility and erasure of gays and lesbians, and works to invalidate gay and lesbian life. Schwartz referred to a recent episode of Designing Women as an example. In the episode "Suzanne," a regular character, sought friendship of a new female character. The plot conflict was Suzanne's discovery that the woman was a lesbian.

By using this plot, the episode of Designing Women makes an effort to address homophobia. However, the show ended with Suzanne's character saying, "If we can put a man on the moon, we can put one on you." Schwartz argued that by allowing this comment to end the episode, the producers and writers were perpetuating the myth that lesbians can be made heterosexual if they are given a man.

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A female participant present, who wished to remain nameless, addressed the inherent violence of the idea of a man forcing himself on the lesbian character against her will. She pointed out that this statement is the same as "all she needs is a good fuck," a statement she explained is used against all women as justification for rape. By portraying gays and lesbians as deserving of violence, the media provides a rationale for gay bashers, agreed Schwartz.

Schwartz also addressed homophobic language, and said that while it is no longer acceptable for celebrities and prominent figures to use words such as "nigger," "kike," and "spic," "faggot" and "dyke" are still frequently used. GLAAD has targeted Bob Hope and Roseanne Barr for their negligent use of these terms, resulting in Hope and Barr making public service announcements against homophobia.

More recently, Andy Rooney was suspended from 60 Minutes by CBS, after he was challenged on a racist comment he made on the air. GLAAD has been campaigning against him for homophobic remarks he made months before the report of racism.

Schwartz cited examples of how the word "homosexual" is most often used in a negative context in the media, "homosexual murderer/murderess" is used, but a term such as "homosexual hero/heroine," which has positive connotations, is rarely used.

Increase in Violence Against Gays and Lesbians

During the discussion Foreman referred to statistics compiled by the Anti-Violence Project in 1984 which recorded that 176 people reported sex-biased crimes to the project, whereas in 1989 the number was 685. This is an increase of approximately 400%. Foreman pointed out that the statistic does not distinguish what part of the increase reflects more willingness to report the crime, and what part represents an actual rise in violence against gays and lesbians.

Foreman believes it is a mixture of both. He agreed with Schwarz who said that it is "still f[pp not un] fashionable to be anti-gay, anti-lesbian," while it is unfa-