LABIA Opens Up

by Heidi Nasr

LABIA, as its anatomically colorful name suggests, is a group for women specifically for politically active lesbian and bisexual women. Funded by the Barnard SGA LABIA (Lesbians And Bisexuals In Action) is setting out to eliminate homophobia one person at a time by increasing the visibility of lesbians. They are following the example set by the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) which helped gay men move from the fringes of society into the mainstream by increasing their exposure. Our main goal is fighting homophobia says Heather LABIA's director and that's big enough so that we have to have smaller goals to make it work. We're going to concentrate a lot on gaining visibility if it worked for gay men it can work for lesbians.

LABIA works by providing a forum for its members to discuss instances of homophobia in their lives and then encouraging them to take action. It is not primarily a support group. Instead it seeks to fill the gap left for homosexuals between the struggle of deciding to come out and the situation of being out and not knowing what to do about the homophobia that they then face. To this end the protected society that college offers is a boon to LABIA because there is such a singular lack of consequences for speaking out in college. In fact the atmosphere of anonymity does not lend itself to the real world. a fact that LABIA wants to use to train its members.

If you get used to speaking out when you're young, Heather says it makes it easier to deal when you face the homophobia in the world. We want to start here. We want to change the common conception of lesbians but we're not interested in changing it from one stereotype to another. We want to show that there's more than one way to be a dyke. As it is any woman over the age of nineteen who looks the least bit tomboyish is considered a lesbian. That's just not accurate.

Among the things that LABIA considers a hindrance to its progress is the ridiculous nature of political correctness. It's so much harder to fight homophobia if people won't admit to being homophobic because they're afraid it would be politically incorrect. We can't get anywhere like that. If people would just admit it then we can sit down and talk about it and maybe get something done.

Heather believes that everyone, heterosexuals and homosexuals alike, has internalized homophobia to such a degree that they don't even know when instances of it are occurring. For instance she says that many homosexuals when they come out are advised by loved ones to make sure ostensibly to protect them from the cruel vicissitudes of homosexuality. 'That's so wrong. In the first place it assumes that being homosexual is all about sex which it's not. In the second place if a nineteen year old woman comes up to you and says 'I think I want to get married and have kids do you think she's sure that she's heterosexual? She also points out that such an reaction is a way for people to avoid expressing their discomfort with homosexuality by implying an attitude of 'Well I can talk you out of this phase, you just need to come to your senses and then I won't have to deal with this.' Homosexuals have come to accept this sort of reaction and LABIA is encouraging them not to instead to learn that they don't have to be apologetic for who they are. It's so frustrating to be picked on all the time we can deal with being lesbians so many other people can't and we have to accept that that is their problem and then try to explain to them what they don't know.

Heather says that's what LABIA is for we want to educate people who have not been very exposed to lesbians we want to provide an information service for lesbians and bisexual women and above all we want to change what we are able to. The hardest part is asking for what you want.

Heidi Nasr is a Barnard first year and a Bulletin Women's Issues Co-Editor

FEBRUARY 15, 1995 9