



In the Life

by Claude J. Summers

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America's only nationally broadcast gay and lesbian newsmagazine, *In the Life* began in 1992 as a variety show, but has since evolved into an acclaimed public-affairs program.

Although *In the Life* is presented by Thirteen/WNET, the New York Public Broadcasting System flagship station, and is distributed by the American Program Service, a major source of programming for public television stations, the show receives no federal funding from PBS or the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Produced by In the Life Media, Inc., a non-profit educational organization, the program is supported largely by membership dues from nearly 5,000 individuals and by foundations such as the Gill Foundation and the Ameringen Foundation.

When it debuted in 1992, *In the Life* played on only six television stations. Now broadcast on over 125 public television stations in thirty states, it plays in the country's top twenty television viewing markets. This penetration is remarkable considering the fact that when it was launched it roused immediate controversy. Even before the first episode was aired, Senator Robert Dole denounced the program from the floor of the United States Senate.

Now each episode of the program is seen by more than one million viewers, which makes *In the Life* the world's most widely distributed gay and lesbian media project. However, dozens of PBS stations still refuse to air the program and many of those that do broadcast it schedule it during late night and early morning hours and fail to promote it.

In most markets, the program airs monthly, in a one-hour format, featuring five or six stories. There are usually six new episodes per year.

In the Life is dedicated to presenting a uniquely gay and lesbian perspective on issues and news relevant to gay men and lesbians and to documenting the gay and lesbian civil rights movement. It also aims to educate both heterosexual and homosexual audiences about the diversity and variety of the gay and lesbian community.

In the Life features stories on a wide range of topics, from AIDS to same-sex marriage and from "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" to gay and lesbian parents. It has been particularly praised for its coverage of events such as the 1993 March on Washington and the 1994 Gay Games and for its attention to youth and global issues. The acclaimed April-May 1998 episode entitled *In the Life Goes Global* reported on the progress of gay rights internationally.

Although many of the episodes feature cameo appearances by gay and lesbian (or gay-friendly) celebrities, and due attention is given to the accomplishments of artists, writers, and entertainers, *In the Life* is dedicated to the real life issues and concerns of grassroots people. Hence, the emphasis is less on glitz and

glamour than on the struggles of ordinary individuals who have performed extraordinary achievements.

A recent show, for example, featured stories about a gay couple who had been honored as Indiana's Foster Parents of the Year and a group of lesbians who were helping the people of Nicaragua recover from a hurricane. Other stories have examined gay and straight high school groups, the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, and lesbian and gay journalists.

In the Life has grown during its first decade to become a valuable resource for the gay and lesbian communities of the United States. For many viewers, it has also become a significant presence on PBS, however reluctant the broadcasting corporation is to acknowledge the fact.

Bibliography

www.inthelifetv.org.

About the Author

Claude J. Summers is William E. Stirton Professor Emeritus in the Humanities and Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He has published widely on seventeenth- and twentieth-century English literature, including book-length studies of E. M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood, as well as *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall* and *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*. He is General Editor of www.gltbtq.com. In 2008, he received a Monette-Horwitz Trust Award for his efforts in combatting homophobia.