



## Disability Issues

by Tina Gianoulis

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In December 2000, the gay newsmagazine *The Advocate* published the results of a reader poll. One of the questions was, "Do you think people with disabilities are treated fairly within the gay and lesbian community?" In response, 58 percent of the readers answered, "No," while only 20 percent said, "Yes." Although informal and unscientific, the poll demonstrates a perceived failure to address disability issues within the glbtq community.

### Terminology

The term "disabled" is used to describe a wide variety of conditions that limit or hinder a person's ability to perform tasks of daily living. Indeed, there has been extensive debate over what words should be used to describe persons with disabilities, ranging from the outdated "handicapped" to the more inclusive "differently abled."

Disabled activists have generally disliked calling their disabilities handicaps, arguing that their chief handicaps are the barriers an unresponsive society creates. These barriers include both physical obstacles to accessibility and attitudes of prejudice, condescension, and ignorance.

Early AIDS activists recognized the important connection between terminology and attitude when they worked to replace the patronizing term "AIDS victims" with the more empowering term "people with AIDS" or "PWAs." Some disabled activists have turned the tables by creating a label for those without disabilities, calling them "TABS" or "temporarily able bodied." This tongue-in-cheek description highlights the fact that most people are likely to experience some form of disability in the course of their lives.

### Diverse Disabilities, Unifying Issues

Disabilities may be the result of genetics, medical disorders, accident, assault, or the aging process. Blindness, deafness, and paraplegia are lumped together under the umbrella term of disability, as are AIDS, chronic fatigue immune disorder syndrome, cerebral palsy, limb amputations, mental illnesses, and much more.

Obviously people with such a wide range of diagnoses have vastly different issues. Some, like the Deaf and many amputees, may not consider themselves disabled at all, because they have adapted so well to any limitations they may have. Deaf people, for example, have created their own language and culture.

However, there are issues that unite many people with disabilities, and primary among them is the issue of the right of control over one's own life. Central to achieving this control is resistance to the prejudice of ableism, which often views people with disabilities as pitiable and helpless.

Other important aspects of independence for those with disabilities are access to social services, including medical care and trained (though not necessarily medical) caretakers, and a societal commitment to

making personal and public spaces accessible to all.

Like gay and lesbian activists, disabled activists have fought against being considered sick or defective and have demanded respect for their unique identities. Reclaiming words like "gimp" and "crip," which were once used to demean them, disabled activists demand equality rather than pity.

### **Queer Disability Issues**

Disabled persons who are also queer may find themselves doubly invalidated. On one hand, they face homophobia within the medical and social service systems and often within their own families. In addition, the partners of gay men and lesbians with disabilities must frequently struggle for recognition of their relationship.

The case of Sharon Kowalski and Karen Thompson provides a powerful example of the difficulties faced by disabled queers who lose control over their own choices. When Kowalski was severely disabled in an automobile accident in 1983, she was placed in the custody of her homophobic parents, forcing Thompson to fight an extended legal battle to gain first visitation rights and then custody of her longtime lover. The Thompson-Kowalski case was a wake-up call to the queer community, both about disabled rights and about the temporary nature of physical health and ability.

On the other hand, disabled queers often find themselves invisible or marginalized within their own community. Accessibility to queer events and queer spaces is an ongoing problem. The problem persists because of ignorance about what is needed; and this ignorance stems from the separation between abled and disabled people within the gay community.

Many queers who do not have disabilities simply do not understand how many issues need to be taken into account to create accessibility. An event location may be advertised as wheelchair accessible because there are no stairs, yet the bathroom is too small to accommodate a wheelchair. American Sign Language interpreters may be engaged to interpret an event, but the event is not publicized within the Deaf community, so Deaf queers do not attend. A chemically sensitive lesbian may attend an event she believes will be accessible, but become ill from sitting behind someone wearing a perfume. Eventually, she may decide she cannot attempt to attend such events and, as a result, experience isolation.

### **Disability Activists**

However, many queers with disabilities have refused to remain silent. They have formed support networks, created publications, and become part of a larger radical disabled rights movement, demanding respect, independence, and accommodation from their own community as well as the larger society.

For example, queers are active in Not Dead Yet, a militant disabled rights group that opposes the assisted suicide movement because it devalues the lives of those with disabilities. Groups such as Blind Friends of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexual, and Transgender People (BFLAG) and the Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf offer support and connection for queers with particular disabilities.

In queer communities everywhere strong disabled activists work in many different ways to counter ableist attitudes and promote inclusivity. In Montreal, for example, activists have raised awareness about queers with disabilities by confronting the lack of accessibility in such venues as Image and Nation, the Montreal gay and lesbian film festival, and l'Androgyne, the city's queer bookstore.

In 1996, Sergeant Sharon Fitzpatrick Smith founded the Lesbian Disabled Veterans of America, which later became the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Disabled Veterans of America. Another activist, Peter

Little founded San Francisco Gay Amputees in 2006.

Disabled gay performance artist Greg Walloch puts an elfishly raunchy face on disability issues in his sharply satiric comic act. Walloch's life and work are the subject of a 2001 film by Eli Kabillio: *Keeping it Real: The Adventures of Greg Walloch*.

Queer disability activists have also started publications to offer support and a public voice to those who have long been isolated and invisible within the glbtq community. San Francisco's Dragonsani Renteria, a Deaf queer trans activist has been instrumental in the formation of the National Deaf Queer Resource Center and *Flash*, a webzine for Deaf queers which began publication in 1994. *Bent: A Journal of Cripgay Voices* is a bi-monthly ezine "by and for cripgay men." The journal, founded in 1999 by Bob Guter, celebrates the full lives of gay men with disabilities, including news, community, and sexuality.

In addition, listserves abound where glbtq people with a wide range of disabilities can share their experiences with others who are coping with similar problems and where caregivers and allies of the disabled can also find information and support.

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### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.