

# SPOTLIGHT *ON* *Growing Up Gay* *in Boston*

by Clint Hamblin



Eight of the original Prime Timers, Al Cortese, Jerry Leone, Bill Kelloway, Woody Baldwin, Camile Bourque, Jim Norris and Dick Bourbeau, celebrated at the organization's 20th anniversary party.

In a recent conversation with a baby boomer, a distinct bitterness was articulated on the subject of growing up gay in Boston. "We didn't have the internet, gay/straight alliances and television stations focusing on LGBT issues," the 60-something gay man complained. "My life would have been much easier if we did, and I'd have spent a lot less money on therapy trying to convince myself that I was a worthy human being."

The boomer talked about growing up. "I was 8 years old when I found myself attracted to the same sex. One day I was sitting under the kitchen table and heard my mother and her sisters talk about those disgusting downtown 'queers.' Mom said, 'They're perverts. They do nasty things to each other. They should all be shipped to some remote island far away from us normal people.' I realized that Mom was talking about me," he said.

A life managing closets, labels and low self-esteem takes effort, but LGBT rights have come a long way since the June 1969 Stonewall incident, when an oppressed and very angry group of gay people in New York City got fed up and turned over a bus, resulting in the instant attention of the nation. Since that unofficial launch of the gay rights movement, much has happened in the United States, including the repeal of federal sodomy laws that made being gay in the 21st century legal and less traumatic, especially in Boston.

Prime Timers is an organization providing an environment for mature gay and bisexual men and their friends to meet for social, educational and cultural activities. The group meets at the United South End Settlements located at 566 Columbus Avenue in the South End, and they are collectively a living history of growing up gay in Boston.

Member Hal Trafford, 75, has lived in the South End for 40 years and is recognized as a successful watercolorist, portrait

painter and art teacher.

"I remember years ago when there were dozens of exciting Boston gay bars. Knock on the door and a little panel would slide open, where you would see a pair of eyes checking to see if you were gay enough to get in," Trafford recalled. "You had to be careful and never hold hands while walking down the street. The gay bar was our indoor haven, but outside you had to always be aware of where you were and how you behaved. Things are quite different today, and I'm sad to say that most of those great bars have disappeared."



M. J. Knoll, Christine Finn and their 4-year-old son, Henry, celebrated the Massachusetts Legislature's decision.



Gay marriage supporters reacted to the Massachusetts Legislature defeating a proposed constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriages and establish civil unions on September 14, 2005.

An associated corollary of this cultural change appears to be the demise of Boston's once very active gay bar scene. Local bars that have serviced the LGBT community for decades have closed. AIDS and social networks available through the internet may be partially responsible for trading one-on-one relationships for virtual friendships, but the real major change is that one's sexual identity is simply less relevant, especially to young people who patronize clubs and socialize with straight and gay people.

The end of sodomy laws in the United States and the legalization of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts have changed LGBT people's lives and perceptions about them. Some see this as an opportunity to legitimize their relationships

through marriage, establish families and become part of a neighborhood, but many who have maintained their "in the closet" status all of their lives strongly resent the change and are deciding to remain anonymous and fully closeted until the end of their days.

"Coming out" and growing up gay in Boston may still be a scary process, but the proverbial gay closet is slowly disappearing or becoming a lesser part of the progression of coming out. If you never go into the closet, why worry about coming out? This attitude is especially prevalent for the young who continue to let us know that they have little problem with same-sex anything.

Growing up gay anywhere in the United States is still not easy, but if you're gay and looking for a city where you can be free to be yourself, Boston is at the top of the list.