



ORLANDO

CONVENTION EDITION 2009

The Newsletter of **Blind, Friends, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People (BFLAG)**

BFLAG is affiliated with the American Council of the Blind and is dedicated to facilitating the free exchange of ideas, opinions and information relative to matters of concern to blind people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender Visit us at

[www.BFLAGNATIONAL.org](http://www.BFLAGNATIONAL.org)

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### **EDITOR'S NOTE:**

You can skip to the next article or section of the newsletter by using your word processor's Find or Search function to find the ## sign.

## **## FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK**

**By Don Brown**

I decided to use this space to present my President's report for those of you who won't be attending our Annual business meeting in Orlando. This report is divided into two parts; 1) where the organization is today; and 2) goals for the year going forward.

As I shared with you in previous "FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK" articles, my first year as President and the board's first year had a rather rocky beginning. We inherited an organization which had very serious internal, external, fiscal, and public relations challenges.

I am pleased to report that with much work, under sometimes difficult circumstances, the board has taken the necessary action to resolve these issues and thereby establishing a more solid organizational foundation.

### **FISCAL ISSUES:**

During the past year, a great deal of time and energy was devoted toward adopting a finance process centered on security and accountability. George Abbott, appointed Treasurer, has managed to pull together and make sense of the various pieces of financial information he inherited and transformed BFLAG's accounting process into a usable system. His work has extended to repairing BFLAG's Paypal account, which allows for members and others to make contributions and pay dues safely and securely from the convenience of their computers. Our Paypal system is now sound and functioning properly. While the hours of work performed in this area by George is relatively invisible to you the member, it is time consuming and critical to our functioning as a non-profit organization. Given George's achievements in this area, please join me in confirming his appointment as Treasurer in Orlando.

Another board accomplishment was the design and launch of the [www.bflagnational.org](http://www.bflagnational.org) website. If you haven't already, please check it out. Not only will you find an accessible and user friendly site, you will also have the option to join the only on-line virtual community of blind and vision impaired LGBT people and our allies

A great deal of thanks goes to Candy and Graham who volunteered hours of their time to ensure our on-line community was fully functional. Their in kind donation would have cost this organization thousands of dollars. Now that our on-line presence is established, it will be our responsibility to continue growing it.

Along With the launch of the new website, the board approved the adoption of a new logo which more effectively captures the BFLAG brand. This in kind donation came from board member Jeremy Lane. Jeremy's donation was greatly appreciated given the expense associated with custom graphic design. The response to the new logo has been very encouraging. See the fall edition of InsideOut for a detailed description.

In part, due to the outreach efforts of Barbara Mattson, I am proud to report that membership is up nearly 25% since last year. I encourage you to read George Ashiotis Membership Report in these pages for a detailed discussion of membership activities.

### **Public Relations:**

#### **Internal Public Relations:**

For a range of reasons, some of which I've shared with you in these pages, BFLAG has not historically enjoyed a very favorable reputation within ACB. As I mentioned in my first "From The President's Desk" column, one of the first things I wanted to do as President was to rebuild the bridges which were earlier burnt. Toward this end, I contacted ACB President Mitch Pomerantz

to express both my and the board's interest in BFLAG improving its image in the ACB family of affiliates.

I am happy to report that over this past year interactions between BFLAG and ACB officers and staff has been collegial and productive. As a result, BFLAG is now moving in the direction to be position to assume a leadership role among ACB affiliates.

External Public Relations: With BFLAG's new on-line presence, it seems as if the flood gates have opened. I am regularly stunned as to the amount of national and international interest in our organization. Just over the past few weeks, we have been contacted by book publishers and authors, an international Deaf LGBT organization, LGBT organizations in Australia and Thailand, an association of HIV medical social workers, numerous sales representatives, and individuals wanting information and referrals.

BFLAG was recently approached by Charlie Vaughn, a film maker who tells the story of untold stories in the LGBT community through short films. Charlie is very interested in blind and vision impaired people being the focus of his next film project. Following his presentation during our last board meeting, the board voted unanimously to further explore partnering with Charlie in the project. I'll be sure to keep you up to date as developments occur.

Convention:

While the board has reduced convention costs by nearly 50% this year, it is my view that current costs continue to be excessive and out of alignment with other affiliate's convention costs. Much more work on bringing these costs in line needs to happen.

Goals For The Year Moving Forward:

Renew BFLAG's membership in Center Link (national association of LGBT centers)

Reduce convention costs by an additional 25%

Identify member(s) with computer skills sets to enhance BFLAG's on-line presence and participate on other committees.

Develop a standard fund raising proposal.

Explore expanding membership participation and electronic voting.

Continue outreach to under-represented populations.

I'll close my report by saying that BFLAG is now a much improved and functional organization with some challenges ahead of it. I am confident that if we continue to move forward on our current course and resist any efforts to undermine our endeavors, the future will be indeed bright for this organization.

Please put up with me for a few more minutes. I'm nearly finished.

As you'll read later in this newsletter, there are three amendments to the BFLAG constitution being proposed. Those members present in Orlando will, by vote, either adopt or reject the proposed changes to the constitution.

I fully support each of the proposed amendments and plan to lobby other members to support them as well.

The first amendment pertains to an organizational name change. Specifically, it is being proposed that the organization's name "Blind Friends of Lesbians and Gays" be changed to "ACB

Blind Pride". A letter to the editor, which you will find in these pages, presents a well thought out and cogent argument supporting a new name and brand identity for the organization.

One of the proposed amendments would open monthly board meetings to the membership. I committed to advancing this constitutional amendment if elected President. I am following through with my promise by putting this proposed amendment forward for an up or down vote. .

The third proposed amendment calls for a code of conduct for board members. Again, I completely support this proposed amendment.

See the article "proposed constitutional amendments" in these pages for specific language.

How can you help further our efforts? Well, I'm glad you asked. One way you can help is by running for one of the 4 board seats. (Secretary, Treasurer and 2 at-large seats) The commitment is approximately 5 volunteer hours per month. Half of this time involves participating on a monthly conference call. One does not have to be present in Orlando to run for a board seat. All paid members are eligible to run. If you are interested, simply forward to [president@bflagnational.org](mailto:president@bflagnational.org) a statement of your intention to run.

You can also help by volunteering on one of our committees. Please contact me for more information in this regard.

Thanks for your time and as always I hope you find the information here to be of some interest. I look forward to seeing many of you in Orlando.

### **## Organizing the First Pride March in Spartanburg, SC** **By Barbara Mattson**

The state of South Carolina is not known as gay friendly, and the city of Spartanburg is no exception. So when people in my church decided to organize a pride march, it was a bold step indeed. Here are some of the things that were addressed when I attended the second meeting. Hopefully, the information here will help you to organize a march in your town.

First there was the issue of the permit to march. We needed to consider how many participants we hoped to have, and whether vehicles would be involved for those who couldn't walk. And then we were required to map out the route. Factored in were whether the roads were city, state, or county owned; how long the anticipated march would take, and whether the marchers were going to be on the sidewalk. It was established that police would ensure that marchers would be allowed across intersections with no fear of traffic. These considerations determined what permit applications were needed, and the cost for police and EMS services.

Then there was the issue of publicity. We hoped that extending personal invitations to community leaders to join the march would provide us community support community. Other publicity would be going in the newspaper and gay-friendly magazines.

There was also an issue of cost. Besides the police and EMS, there was are insurance expenses, brochures to be distributed with sponsors listed, ads, t-shirts, helium balloons, and a banner. As per clean up following the march, some of the planning committee hoped to carry a trash receptacle sparing that expense.

Fund Raising quickly became an important part of our effort. The first step was to name ourselves. We wanted to make sure that we didn't use a name already in use. And then to establish a clear goal. Then we established a clear purpose.

Then we created a budget from which we could draw upon from the total amount of funds we hoped to raise. Finally, a fund raising letter would be drafted and sent out to prospective individual's donors and corporations. To reduce cost, we utilized e-mail when possible. Our strategy was getting well-known donors to give in hopes that it would encourage other contributions. An art/logo contest with \$10/entry was established with the prize being a profile in the brochure and the winning logo on a T-shirt. So as not to discourage participation, a request for a registration donation from organizations and individuals to participate in the march and have a booth afterward was decided. (Booth registrants may be vendors not necessarily participating in the march.) Since our church has been donating to various organizations monthly, we hoped the pride march could be a recipient as well.

Other Types of Donations: We hoped to get food and drinks donated from vendors thus relieving us of any added insurance expenses associated with serving food and beverages.

Where to House Funds: Since we aren't established as a 501C3 yet, we hoped that funds could be housed under a line item through the church, or one of the two local PFLAG's which would be on a short-term basis. It was felt that any access could be saved for the following year, or donated to a related cause.

Dealing with Protestors: Any organized protestors would also have to seek a permit. Then the police would work with all groups to ensure that boundaries are maintained, and any illegal harassers would be dealt with. I'm just hoping it will be a cool June 20 between 10 and 2 which should help to cool any hot tempers.

The Post-March Activities: They are planned to take place on the church's lawn where seating would be available. Someone has been assigned to check as to whether the city would require a permit for this, but it was felt that since it would be on church property, the permit would not be necessary. Also planned was a stage with speakers to amplify music and those making speeches such as the mayor. Obtaining porta potties, (the church would not be open to participants) renting or borrowing extra tables, and having a rainbow-shape of balloons were also mentioned. In addition, was the possibility for needing police and EMS services.

My biggest disappointment is that money and how far people are willing to walk seem to be dictating our proposed route the most, so the route will only briefly take us to some fairly well-traveled streets. To me, pride means visibility, and unless we can get TV coverage, I'm not sure we're going to do any of this for anyone but ourselves.

Nonetheless, I will be there with a big BFLAG sign.

I plan to write a follow-up article on how the march went and some other concerns and items established at subsequent planning meetings.

### **## BFLAG's 2009 Official Convention Schedule**

NOTE: Check with the hotel operator to learn the BFLAG suite number.

#### **Saturday, July 4<sup>th</sup>**

7:00 pm - 1:00 am

BFLAG Celebrates the 4th of July at Disney's Pleasure Island

Meet in BFLAG Suite

#### **Sunday, July 5<sup>th</sup>**

8:30

BFLAG Breakfast club

Meet in BFLAG suite

11:00 am - 12:00 pm  
BFLAG Volunteer Orientation  
Held in BFLAG Suite

12:15  
BFLAG Lunch Club  
Meet in BFLAG suite

1:00 pm - 2:30 pm  
BFLAG Pre-Convention Board Meeting  
Meet in BFLAG Suite

4:00 pm - 6:00 pm  
BFLAG Welcome to Orlando Party held in the BFLAG Suite

7:00  
ACB Convention Opening Ceremony  
Grand Ball Room

**Monday, July 6<sup>th</sup>**

7:00 am - 8:15 am  
BFLAG Breakfast Club  
Meet in BFLAG suite

8:30am - Noon  
ACB Convention General Session  
Grand Ball Room

12:15  
BFLAG Lunch club  
Meet in BFLAG suite

1:00 pm - 2:30 pm  
BFLAG Seminar #1 - "Gay Relationships"  
Speaker: Ray O'Neill, Trinity College, The University of Dublin  
See ACB Convention Program for room location

3:00 pm - 4:30 pm  
BFLAG Seminar #2 - "Gay Marriage & Hate Crimes"  
Speakers: Human Rights Committee  
See ACB Convention Program for room location

5:00  
BFLAG Dinner Club  
Meet in BFLAG suite

7:00 pm - 9:00 pm  
BFLAG Business Meeting  
Held in the BFLAG Suite

**Tuesday, July 7<sup>th</sup>**

7:00 am - 8:15 am  
BFLAG Breakfast Club  
Meet in BFLAG Suite

8:30 - Noon  
ACB Convention General Session  
Grand Ball Room

12:15  
BFLAG Lunch club  
Meet in BFLAG Suite

1:00 pm - 2:30 pm  
BFLAG Seminar #3 - "Gay Literature"  
Speakers: Judy Dixon & Terry Gorman  
See ACB Convention Program for room location

3:00 pm - 4:30 pm  
BFLAG Seminar #4 - "Transgender Panel" Speakers: TBA  
See ACB Convention Program for room location

5:30  
BFLAG Dinner Club  
Meet in BFLAG suite

8:30 pm - 10:00 pm  
BFLAG Discussion Group (Men & Women)  
Meet in BFLAG Suite

**Wednesday, July 8<sup>th</sup>**

7:00 am - 8:15 am  
BFLAG Breakfast Club  
Meet in BFLAG suite

8:30 – Noon  
ACB Convention General Session  
Grand Ball Room

12:15  
BFLAG Lunch Club  
Meet in BFLAG Suite

3:00 pm - 5:30 pm  
BFLAG Titanic Experience Tour  
Meet in Lobby

5:00  
BFLAG Dinner Club  
Meet in BFLAG Suite

7:00 – 9:00  
Private screening of "after Stone Wall"  
Shown in the BFLAG suite

10:00 pm - 2:00 am  
BFLAG visit's PULSE (Club/Bar)  
Meet in the BFLAG suite

**Thursday, July 9<sup>th</sup>**

7:00 – 8:15

BFLAG Breakfast club  
Meet in BFLAG suite

8:30 – Noon  
ACB convention General Session  
Grand Ball Room

12:15  
BFLAG Lunch club  
Meet in BFLAG suite

2:00 pm - 5:00 pm  
Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum Tour  
Meet in Lobby

6:00  
BFLAG Dinner Club  
Meet in BFLAG suite

9:00 pm - 10:30 pm  
Discussion Group (Men & Women)  
Meet in BFLAG Suite

**Friday, July 10<sup>th</sup>**

7:00 am - 8:15 am  
BFLAG Breakfast Club  
Meet in BFLAG suite

8:30 – Noon  
ACB Convention General Session  
Grand Ball Room

12:15  
BFLAG lunch club  
Meet in BFLAG suite

6:00 pm  
BFLAG Farewell Dinner [Get-together]  
Meet in BFLAG suite

10:00 pm - 2:00 am  
BFLAG visit's the Parliament House (Club/Bar)  
Meet in BFLAG suite

**## REGISTRATION INSTRUCTIONS**

1. Register on-line at [www.acb.org](http://www.acb.org), or register on paper by using a separate form for each person. Make copies if necessary, or request extra forms by calling the national office at (800) 424-8666.
2. Complete all buff-colored pages. The bolded amount for each event is the pre-registration price. The second amount is the price at the hotel. Place an X on the line to the right of the events for which you wish to register.



3. The convention administrative fee is \$20 (pre-registration) and \$30 (on-site); it is pre-printed on the form and is required.

4. You can be a Bronze, Silver, Gold or Platinum Sponsor, even if you aren't coming to convention. Sponsors receive a special ribbon to wear on their convention badges and are recognized during general sessions, in the convention newspaper and on ACB Radio.

5. ACB will make NO refunds for the convention administrative fee or tickets that you just don't want. Refunds will be issued ONLY if tickets for an event you have requested are unavailable, or if you are unable to attend any part of the convention. You must request the refund by writing to the ACB Minnesota office at the address shown below, or by calling (612) 332-3242, ON OR BEFORE June 26, 2009. In case of illness during the convention which requires you to return home or be hospitalized, refunds will be issued ONLY for the meals, events, and tours which take place after your absence begins.

6. Your completed form and total payment MUST BE RECEIVED by June 26, 2009. Forms received after June 26 will not be processed and pre-registration discounts WILL NOT apply.

7. Mail form and payment in the enclosed pre-addressed envelope; be sure to add postage. Or mail to:

AMERICAN COUNCIL OF THE BLIND  
6300 Shingle Creek Pkwy., Suite 195  
Brooklyn Center, MN 55430

8. Call the ACB national office at (800) 424-8666 or (202) 467-5081 with questions regarding the convention, or check the ACB website at [www.acb.org](http://www.acb.org) for updated information.

ACB Reserves the Right to Modify Programs and Activities as Necessary to Meet the Needs of the Convention.

## **## BFLAG ANNUAL BUSINESS MEETING AGENDA**

**Monday, July 6, 2009**

**Rosen Centre Hotel**

**Orlando, Florida**

**7:00 – 9:00 pm EDT**

- ITEM: Call to order
- ITEM: Roll call
- ITEM: Approval of June minutes
- ITEM: President's report, Don Brown
- ITEM: Treasurer's report, George Abbott
- ITEM: Outreach committee report, Barbara Mattson
- ITEM: Membership committee report George Ashiotis
- ITEM: Convention coordinating report, Mark Hanohano
- ITEM: Fundraising committee report, Jeremy Lane
- ITEM: newsletter committee report, Don Brown
- I.T. committee report, Kevin Ratliff
- ITEM: Public relations report, rob hill
- ITEM: Proposed constitutional amendments

**1. Name change:**  
**(existing language)**

ARTICLE I

NAME:

The name of this organization shall be Blind Friends of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People, known as BFLAG.

**(proposed language)**

ARTICLE I

NAME:

The name of this organization shall be ACB Blind Pride, known as Blind Pride.

2. OPENING REGULAR BOARD MEETINGS TO THE MEMBERSHIP

**(existing language)**

ARTICLE IV

MEETINGS:

A. A regular meeting of this organization shall be held once a year to be known as the ANNUAL CONVENTION.

B. A MAJORITY of all votes of voting members in good standing AT THE CONVENTION shall constitute a QUORUM to do business.

C. Procedure: In the absence of procedures contained herein or in the bylaws, all proceedings, of this organization shall be governed by ROBERTS RULES OF ORDER, NEWLY REVISED.

**(proposed language)**

ARTICLE IV

MEETINGS:

A. A regular meeting of this organization shall be held once a year to be known as the ANNUAL CONVENTION.

B. A MAJORITY of all votes of voting members in good standing AT THE CONVENTION shall constitute a QUORUM to do business.

c. Regularly scheduled board meeting shall be open to the membership, pursuant to guidelines established by the board.

d. Procedure: In the absence of procedures contained herein or in the bylaws, all proceedings, of this organization shall be governed by ROBERTS RULES OF ORDER, NEWLY REVISED.

3. Board of Director's code of conduct

**(new language)**

ARTICLE VI

DIRECTORS:

The board expects of itself and its members ethical and businesslike conduct. This commitment includes proper use of authority and appropriate decorum in group and individual behavior when

acting as directors. Failure to do so will subject a board member to disciplinary actions contained herein.

ITEM: Elections

Secretary  
At-large seat  
At-large seat

ITEM: Adjournment

## **## PROPOSED CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS**

### **Name change:** **(existing language)**

ARTICLE I

NAME:

The name of this organization shall be Blind Friends of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People, known as BFLAG.

### **(proposed language)**

ARTICLE I

NAME:

The name of this organization shall be ACB Blind Pride, known as Blind Pride.

## 2. OPENING REGULAR BOARD MEETINGS TO THE MEMBERSHIP

(existing language)

ARTICLE IV

MEETINGS:

A. A regular meeting of this organization shall be held once a year to be known as the ANNUAL CONVENTION.

B. A MAJORITY of all votes of voting members in good standing AT THE CONVENTION shall constitute a QUORUM to do business.

C. Procedure: In the absence of procedures contained herein or in the bylaws, all proceedings, of this organization shall be governed by ROBERTS RULES OF ORDER, NEWLY REVISED

(proposed language)

ARTICLE IV

MEETINGS:

A. A regular meeting of this organization shall be held once a year to be known as the ANNUAL CONVENTION.

B. A MAJORITY of all votes of voting members in good standing AT THE CONVENTION shall constitute a QUORUM to do business.

C. Regularly scheduled board meetings shall be open to the membership, pursuant to guidelines established by the board.

D. Procedure: In the absence of procedures contained herein or in the bylaws, all proceedings, of this organization shall be governed by ROBERTS RULES OF ORDER, NEWLY REVISED.

E. Board of Director's code of conduct (new language)

#### ARTICLE VI OFFICERS:

The board expects of itself and its members ethical and businesslike conduct. This commitment includes proper use of authority and appropriate decorum in group and individual behavior when acting as directors. Failure to do so will subject a board member to disciplinary actions contained herein.

#### **## Membership Report** **by George Ashiotis** **BFLAG Membership Chair**

I know many of you will not be joining us in Orlando and I wanted to share with you, in this short article, the membership report I'll be presenting there. I think you'll be impressed with our growth. I have culled from our data base the following statistics:

Our total membership is 198. This is 198 people for whom we have complete contact information. ACB's national office will not recognize a person as a member of an affiliate unless we can provide a mailing address.

158 of our members (80 percent) are blind or vision-impaired. This is great because this means our affiliate has a predominance of blind and vision-impaired people while still enjoying the support of loyal sighted patrons who contribute to and are sensitive to our cause.

60 of our members are women--about 30 percent of our entire body. We seriously need to balance out the scale here, folks. Counting the women was a bit tricky as there are names listed such as Dale, Chris and Pat which are androgynous.

17 of our members, not quite 10 percent, are "life-time members." This small but distinguished group has each given a sum of \$300, covering their life-time membership. Bless them! If others of you out there are in a position to donate in such a lump sum, I encourage and implore you to do so. We would be profoundly and eternally grateful.

All but four of our members reside in the United States. We have two in Canada, and one each in England and Japan. Here is yet another area where I would like to see growth. Let's go global, folks!

I've saved the most impressive statistic for last. We have registered 38 new members over the last year--an increase of nearly 25 percent. We've worked hard since our last convention. We have overcome a lot of obstacles and yet, we have much to be proud of: We've grown in number; we have a comprehensive data base; we have a welcome packet which goes out to every new member.

Orlando is just around the corner and I am looking forward to meeting up with old friends. I am equally excited about making new ones. I would like to see as many BFLAG's members as possible. Come on, everyone, let's raise the number of attendees!

You can join BFLAG or pay membership dues, safely and securely by visiting [www.bflagnational.org](http://www.bflagnational.org) and click on "national membership" If attending convention you can join or update your membership in the BFLAG suite.

## **## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

### **Editor:**

I am once again compelled to urge our membership to revisit the idea of a new name for our affiliate. I, for one, have never been comfortable with the name, but more to the point, I never believed that it accurately represented or identified those who would stand under its banner. "Blind Friends of Lesbians and Gays," as a rubric, is closeted at worst and vague at best. I understand that there may originally have been some sense of protection and safety afforded by such a cryptic appellation but, since the formation of this affiliate, I believe we have made great strides in becoming accepted by the general community. We can now, more confidently, move among our sighted and heterosexual counterparts with dignity and pride. I do not, myself, wear my sexual identity on my sleeve; I'm not a screamer. No disparagement meant there--I applaud those who are. The GLBT community owes much to them. They made the way safe for those of us who weren't as courageous. It is in large part to them we owe the socio-political visibility we currently enjoy. The drag queens, after all, were the ones at the vanguard of the Stonewall riots. In these modern times when our fellow citizens and neighbors openly hold seats in state senates and city councils as gay men and women, I want to be a part of an organization that is not ashamed to stand behind a name that simply and clearly defines its membership.

The adjustment made in Las Vegas, from "Blind Friends of Lesbians and Gays" to "Blind, Friends, Lesbians and Gays," is a cheap patch up job, hastily and unthinkingly arrived at simply to preserve the acronym "BFLAG." And why, I ask! BFLAG, as a name, does not have the cache of an "IBM" or "AT&T" that it merits preservation. The thrust of the opposition to a new name was driven, I believe, by the possession of certain pieces of merchandise, such as coffee mugs and towels, bearing the BFLAG logo which was at risk of losing value should the name be changed. Is this any reason to compromise a group's identity? What does this gain us in Pride?

Whenever I mention B-FLAG, people immediately hear "P-FLAG." "Parents and Friends of lesbians and gays" is a laudable organization for whom I will always have deep respect and gratitude, but do I want my identity lost or mistaken for theirs? No, indeed I do not!

Our affiliate is currently active in aligning itself with GLBT centers nationwide. these centers are composed of dedicated people who have fought hard, and in many cases, put their lives at risk in order that gay men and women may not have to hide who they are. Can we, in all good consciousness, ask to be included among these folks who have sacrificed so much for the good of all GLBT people, and remain veiled behind a murky appellation? Can we? Would that in any way show us as being proud of who we are? I don't think so. We have to unite under a cohesive and revelatory identity in order to take our place with the greater GLBT community.

In this year when we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, the commencement of the Gay Liberation movement, I submit BLIND PRIDE to be considered by our lesbian, gay, bi and transgender members for the name of our affiliate. "The word blind" has been traditionally used as a pejorative. Expressions like blind drunk, blind faith, blind luck, connect blindness with ignorance and chance. The word "Pride" is a symbol of strength which since 1969 has become synonymous with the word "Gay.: Marry these

two words, "Blind" and "Pride" and there is a banner that I'm proud to stand under. It is time for those of us who are blind and gay to be seen in a positive, truer light.

George Ashiotis  
New York, New York

## **##BEING BLIND AND GAY**

**By: Robert Feinstein**

This article appeared in a French language magazine out of Montreal. This is the English version that was translated into French for the magazine. I hope that it will give you a better understanding of what my life has been like as a blind person who is also gay. If this article enables me to make some new friends who accept me for who I am, then it will have been well worth the writing! Please feel free to contact me at: [harlynn@panix.com](mailto:harlynn@panix.com) and my name is Bob. My guide dog's name is Harley. (NOTE: Since the original printing of this article Bob's guide dog Harley has passed.)

Please note that I have a good long distance service, which makes phone calls and phone friendships very possible.

I want to thank Chandler and Tony (Chanton.com) for their continued support of my article, and for their understanding of how difficult and at times isolating, it can be for those of us who are gay and also blind.

(EDITED by Bob June 1, 2000)

I was born on December 1, 1949. I was three months early, and only weighed 1lb. 14oz. I was put into an incubator and, due to the amount of oxygen I was given, my retina cells developed too quickly, and became so damaged that by the time I was brought home from the hospital, I was totally blind. I of course have never seen and have absolutely no visual memories at all.

My parents decided that they would try to treat me as normally as possible, and although I often heard the word "blind" I did not really know what it meant. I was guided by my mother, or by my aunts. I was always made a fuss over because people said I was such a "cute little boy". Many lamented my fate, but I was carefree and happy. When I was about 5 years old, I began to realize that I was different from other children. I heard children running around without being guided. Kids talked about coloring, drawing, and writing with a pencil. When I asked my mother, she told me that I would go to school and learn to read and write braille. I knew I was different, but I of course did not understand the ramifications of my blindness, and took all in stride.

ALL I COULD DO was listen to the sound of the chalk

When I was about 8 years old, I began to realize that other kids made friends more easily than I did. I went to a school far from my home, and was taken there by bus. There were other blind kids at the school, and I noticed that we all stayed together. When we did go to classes with the sighted kids, we were treated kindly, but were not fully included. I would sit for hours listening to kids read out loud from print books, or hear the teacher writing on the black board. I loved the sound the chalk made against the blackboard, but I realized that others could read what was being written, and all I could do was listen to the sound of the chalk.

I will skip a few years and talk about when I was 14 years old, and in the ninth grade. I began to be teased by the other blind kids, because I mostly wanted to play with the girls, and did not want to participate in the rough games the blind boys played. They would play a kind of hockey with a large wardrobe and a crushed cigarette box. Where the wardrobe touched the wall on each side were the goals and the cigarette box was the puck. The blind kids played another game called taxi, where one of us would sit in a chair and the other would move the chair around the room very quickly. Because we were blind, the person pushing the chair would often bang into things.

I was afraid of these games because I was always overweight, slow, clumsy, and I usually wound up getting badly hurt. I much preferred sitting and reading a braille book, or talking to the girls. I even learned to bounce a ball, and learned some of the rhymes the girls would say while playing ball or jumping rope. I was teased unmercifully, and soon, even the girls got tired of playing with me, and so I mostly stayed alone, reading, and listening to what was going on around me. I knew that I was very different from the other kids, and I felt horribly lonely. I didn't fit in with the sighted kids, but what was worse, I didn't fit in with the blind kids, either. All the boys were interested in sports and rough games. I wasn't. Some talked about girls, but because I was blind from birth, and because nobody ever talked to me about sex, I had no idea what was being discussed. I am ashamed to say that I didn't even know the difference between girls and boys, except that girls were usually nicer to me, and yet, I felt a strange feeling when hugging a male student.

When I was 15 years old, a girl explained to me how babies were born. "You're very stupid!" Harriet told me. "Your father stuck his penis in your mother's hole, and that's how you were born. Don't you know anything?" I wanted to ask more questions. Where was this hole? What was all this talk about "hard-ons" and "erections?" But I knew that if I admitted how little I knew, I'd be laughed at, so I kept quiet. I could not ask my mother. She never talked about such things, and I knew she would only be upset and tell me not to ask so many questions. So, I ordered books in braille about sex, and read them, and had a vague understanding.

What is surprising, and very important, is that I began to realize that I was attracted to other boys and men, and not to women. I realized that I had a strange feeling when close to people of my own sex that I did not have when I was with women. I somehow knew that this was not the way it should be, and never mentioned it to anyone.

I TRIED DATING GIRLS, but I knew it wasn't working.

I will now talk about my college years. I spent 4 years at a well known college in Ohio. I had finally figured out that I was gay. I wondered if there were other gay students, but did not know how to meet them. I tried dating girls, and forced myself to kiss them, but I knew it wasn't working. I wanted to talk about my feelings, but had nobody to express them to. When I was a senior, some students who I had heard were gay decided to start a discussion group. I wanted to go, but was afraid to ask for directions to where the discussion was taking place, because I did not want others on campus to realize I was gay.

To understand my dilemma, it is important to realize that I was not able to fit in with the other students because of my blindness. I had some casual friends, but I was not part of any social group. I spent much time alone, or being read to by fellow students. I therefore was very uneasy about admitting that I was gay, because I was afraid I would be even more unaccepted than I already was. I felt that I had enough strikes against me by virtue of the fact that I was blind and overweight. I didn't have the courage to add another problem to the list. During my four years at college, I never had any gay friends, and never even knew that one of my roommates was gay. I kept all of my feelings inside.

Now, I must talk about my two years in France. I went to France through an American program, and I stayed there for two years. I arrived in France after my graduation from college. I met two blind guys who were gay. One was a fellow from Algeria, and the other was a blind French guy. I had my first experiences with them. I wanted desperately to meet other French gay people, but was afraid to ask my classmates. I had no access to printed materials, and no way to try to meet French gay people.

I WAS READY to conquer the gay world!

When I returned from France, I got a job working with non-English speaking kids who needed help with reading and speaking English. I badgered my parents until they helped me get my own

little studio apartment. I still live in this apartment, as rents are very high in NYC, and I am presently on a fixed income because I took an early retirement. But getting back to my story: when I finally had my apartment, I decided I was going to try to meet gay people. I was now free from my parent's restrictions, and I had a guide dog. So, I was ready to conquer the gay world! But how could I find information? I had nobody to read printed material to me dealing with gay subjects. I had no way to know who was gay and who wasn't. I wondered how sighted gay people met. I finally called a gay hotline and was given the names and addresses of some gay bars. I was told about a group called "mirth and girth" which is for overweight gay people. (In Montreal, I think the group exists under the name Club Panda.)

I remember my excitement when my guide dog and I set out for our first gay bar. We got off the subway at Christopher Street, a street in the heart of Greenwich Village. I asked for directions to the bar, but once inside, I realized that this wasn't going to work! First of all, the noise level was incredible! I couldn't hear a thing. Second of all, because I couldn't see, I had no idea what was going on around me. I was basically rendered deaf and blind because of the noise level. I sat at the bar, and felt worse and worse as time went by. Nobody tried to talk to me. I finally got the courage to tap the person next to me, and to try to strike up a conversation. The guy was polite, but after talking with him a while, he told me he was with someone. I realized that I had no way of knowing who was alone, who was with someone, and what was going on. I went to other bars on subsequent days, but had no better luck.

I began to realize that being blind was proving to be a barrier in my meeting gay people. I decided that, perhaps the problem was the fact that I was overweight. So, I decided to go to a Mirth and Girth dance. Surely, there would be people much heavier than I was, and surely I'd have a better time. Well, unfortunately, the same thing happened. I was shown to a seat, and there I stayed. Nobody came over to talk to me. I finally left and vowed I would never try to meet gay people in this way. It wasn't working, and I was feeling worse about being blind and being gay than I ever had in the past.

I AM DISAPPOINTED with the gay community.

What is my situation now? Well, I am 47 years old. I have very few gay friends. I have strong opinions, though. Basically, I am disappointed with the gay community, at least in NYC. I had thought that, because of the horrors of Aids, gay people would be sensitized to the needs of others. But this hasn't been my experience. It seems that the gay community is ready to help those who become blind from Aids. They reach out to those suffering from Aids. This is how it should be. But this compassion does not extend to those of us who are gay and blind for other reasons. What I am about to say may sound harsh, but it seems to me that if you are a person with aids, you gain a certain respect, even a certain prestige in the gay community. Organizations are set up to help meet your needs. You are included, and you are helped. But if you are just an ordinary gay person with a disability, you don't have that certain "mystique". You are made to feel like you do not belong.

I know that many people with HIV suffer visual problems, and I would like to see more communication between people born blind like me and those who went blind later in life from HIV complications. I think we could teach each other a great deal, and broaden each other's horizons. For example, I know what it is like living with blindness, but these people had careers and lived a full gay lives, something that has been denied to me. I now have one friend who is losing his sight. He was a costume designer, and he has been a wonderful resource for me; he says I have helped him, too, so it has grown into a great friendship. I wish gay organizations would open their hearts to those of us who are not blind from Aids or HIV, but who do need help with readers and companionship.

Imagine walking down a heavily gay populated street. You see a blind person with his guide dog. You probably don't stop to ask yourself, "Is he gay? Could he want to talk? Would we have something in common?"



I WANT TO HAVE a few buddies I can feel a closeness to.

I hope that I have been able to give you a glimpse of what life is like for me as a totally blind and gay man. I also hope that I will make some new friends and meet some people who will accept me for who I am, and who will be able to look beyond my blindness. What is sad to me is that I have met some exceptionally kind gay women, and some straight men, with whom I have become friendly. But I want to have more gay male friends. I want to be able to talk with other gay men, take walks with them, have things described to me, have things read to me that pertain to gay topics, and have a few buddies who I can feel a closeness to.

I ask only that I be accepted for who I am. It is of course important to realize that certain things are a must. First of all, it is imperative that any new friends I make understand that I need help with certain tasks: being guided, having things read to me, and having movies described. Also, it is important that anyone wanting to get to know me understand that my dog comes with me. I will never permit anyone to try to tell me I cannot enter with my dog, whether it be a restaurant, or a taxi. So I ask any new friends to respect my dog and his work and devotion to me.

Once I make a friend, with time and patience, my blindness becomes less of an issue. In fact, a close friend of mine who comes to read my mail every week, has told me that he just takes it as a matter of course. He guides me easily and knows that "No dog, no Bob!"

Remember, whether we can see or not, whether we can hear or not, whether we can walk or not, we are all human beings with the same needs, desires, wants, dreams, and hopes. We are not as different as our outward appearance would make you think at first glance

A version of this article first appeared in a French Canadian magazine. I've become less isolated than I was when I wrote that original version, and my thanks goes to Penpal Connection, which reprinted it on their website; thanks also to all of you who have written to me. hope you will continue to do so. I still dream of a special friend who will love me, and accept me and Harley as a team.

### **## Top Fun Facts About Orlando**

1. According to Carlson Wagonlit Travel's 2006 Travel Trends Survey, Orlando is the second most popular domestic travel destination in the country (Las Vegas placed first).
2. Out of the estimated 50 million tourists who visit Orlando each year, over 2 million are international visitors, with the majority of foreign tourists coming from the United Kingdom.
3. There are now 20,000 to 25,000 vacation homes, villas and rental properties in Central Florida, mostly located near the theme parks.
4. The official nickname of the city of Orlando is "The City Beautiful," although it is also known as "O-Town."
5. Ever wonder why there are so many Olive Gardens and Red Lobsters restaurants in Orlando? Orlando is the corporate headquarters of Darden Restaurants, which also runs the Bahama Breeze, Smokey Bones, and Seasons 52 restaurants.
6. Even though few people outside of Florida knew where Orlando was before Walt Disney World opened in 1971, the city of Orlando had been around for more than a century before that; it was incorporated in 1875.

7. Orlando is the county seat of Orange County, Florida, although the vast citrus groves for which the county was named no longer exist.

8. Before there was Disney, there was also a considerable amount of cattle ranching in Central Florida; you can still see cattle grazing along certain stretches of the 417 GreeneWay Expressway.

9. Although many of Orlando's citizens (especially the most famous ones) are originally from somewhere else, there are a few celebrities who were born and raised in Orlando, including Wayne Brady and Delta Burke.

10. Beat generation icon Jack Kerouac lived in the College Park neighborhood of Orlando during the time his novel *On the Road* was published in 1957.

- Once a quiet farming town, Orlando now has more visitors than any other city in Florida. The main reason, of course, is Walt Disney World – along with Universal Studios and Sea World.
- This region of the country sees an estimated 52 million tourists a year.
- The city is best known for the many tourist attractions in the area, in particular the nearby Walt Disney World Resort, located in Lake Buena Vista about
- 20 miles south of Orlando city limits. Other notable attractions include Sea World and Universal Orlando Resort.
- Orlando ranks only behind San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, and Miami as the most visited United States city by foreign travelers.
- Orlando is also home to the University of Central Florida, the second largest university in Florida and the 6th largest campus in the nation.
- Orlando is the second largest city in the country for number of hotel rooms and one of the busiest American cities for conferences and conventions, with the Orange County Convention Center the country's second largest in square footage.
- Orlando's symbol is the fountain of Lake Eola.
- Orlando is home to the world's largest Hard Rock Café.
- A 2006 U.S. Census population count gave the city population as 224,223, making it the sixth largest city in Florida.

### **## YOUR ORLANDO EATING GUIDE**

In Orlando your registration bag will have a coupon inside that will entitle you to a great book of coupons, good for lots of discounts at the Pointe Orlando Mall.

Thanks to Jay Bader for making the following list of Pointe Orlando restaurants available to us.

POINTE ORLANDO  
GENERAL INFO  
9101 International Drive

Orlando, FL 32819  
PHONE: (407) 248-2838  
HOURS: Monday through Saturday, 11 AM - 8 PM  
Sunday, 12 PM - 8 PM

Pointe Orlando is open 365 days a year, 7 days a week. Many restaurants and bars remain open later than store hours.

#### **DINING:**

##### Adobe Gila's

This casual, open-air Margarita bar and cantina features south of the border favorites including tacos, quesadillas and Gila wraps. The main specialty, however, is the unique frozen drinks, a selection of more than 50 different tequilas, and live bands and entertainment six nights a week. (407) 903-1477

##### B.B. King's Blues Club

Eat, drink and dance your BLUES away! B.B. King's Blues Club is located on the second level of Pointe Orlando next to Taverna Opa and across from the new Regal Cinemas. The music is fun, upbeat and timeless. B.B. King's Blues Club offers four full-service bars and a full menu complete with a variety of Southern comfort food fused with flavors from around the globe. (407) 370-4550

##### Cuba Libre Restaurant & Rum Bar

Be in Havana by dinnertime. Visit Cuba Libre Restaurant & Rum Bar for award-winning Latin cuisine, dancing, floorshows and not-to-be-missed tropical cocktails! Cuba Libre features a contemporary interpretation of traditional Cuban cuisine by renowned Chef Guillermo Pernot, a selection of over 70 rums and a broad base of Latin cocktails highlighting their signature mojitos. Reservations are recommended and complimentary valet parking in front of the restaurant is available. (407) 226-1600

##### Hooters

Where else are you going to go for wings, seafood, sandwiches and of course, the "nearly-world-famous" Hooter Girls? Hooters of course. A wide array of menu items includes shrimp, salads, smothered chicken sandwiches and chicken wings served mild, medium, hot or 3-Mile Island. (407) 355-7711

##### Johnny Rockets

Every Johnny Rockets restaurant features simple, great-tasting food from a menu of All-American nostalgic favorites, including juicy hamburgers, hand-dipped shakes and malts and freshly baked apple pie. Always served with a smile. Enjoy an All-American diner look and feel, along with great service, food and fun. That's the Johnny Rockets experience. Voted Best Kids Place by Orlando Magazine in 2003. (407) 903-0762

##### La Creperia Café

Over the past 22 years, Chef Dinos has perfected the art of crepe making. Using the freshest ingredients and cooked to perfection, Chef Dinos' crepes are a blend of a visual and delectable feast. Stop by La Creperia Cafe at Pointe Orlando whether you're in the mood for a filling meal or a sweet treat! With a menu offering breakfast crepes, savory crepes, sweet crepes, paninis, wraps, soups, salads, beer, wine and coffee, there's something for everyone! (407) 370-0008

##### Maggiano's Little Italy

Maggiano's Little Italy offers guests traditional Italian-American fare in a relaxed setting. Red-checked tablecloths, family portraits, leather banquettes and richly polished mahogany wood provide a warm ambiance for enjoyable home-cooked meals served either family-style or in single

servings. Five private rooms are available for group functions from 15 people to over 240 people. (407) 241-8660

#### Pizzeria Valdiano

Pizzeria Valdiano offers a menu filled with authentic Italian favorites including specialty pies, pizza by the slice, stromboli, subs, salads, pastries, espresso and more. Customers can complement their meal with beer or wine. This family-owned and operated New York-style neighborhood pizzeria is located on the first level of Pointe Orlando next to the new Regal Cinemas Ticket Box Office. Pizzeria Valdiano offers lunch, dinner and take-out. (407) 903-5855

#### Redrock Canyon Grill

Featuring a bold menu that includes a wood-burning stone rotisserie and a dramatic exhibition kitchen, Redrock Canyon Grill offers straightforward American cooking in a high-energy atmosphere. With an array of menu items that capture the essence of healthful and fresh comfort foods, guests at Redrock Canyon Grill can enjoy the Millionaire Shrimp appetizer before diving into a Tomahawk Ribeye Steak or Melodie's Homemade Chicken Pot Pie. Semi-private dining is available. Valet parking is complimentary. (407) 363-3933

#### Taverna Opa

Taverna Opa features authentic Greek cuisine in a relaxed atmosphere. Located on the second level of Pointe Orlando, the restaurant is the fifth location in Florida. Known for its festive surroundings, Taverna Opa offers entertainment such as belly dancing and Greek music nightly. The restaurant has a semi-private room for parties and meetings and offers menu options from a la carte to family-style service. (407) 351-8660

#### The Capital Grille

The Capital Grille is a fine dining restaurant that specializes in dry aged steaks, chops and fresh seafood acclaimed by the nation's toughest food critics. Its wine list features an award-winning collection of over 400 selections from around the world. An elegant, relaxed atmosphere and gracious service are hallmarks. Enjoy our outdoor patio and complimentary valet parking. Private dining is also available. (407) 370-4392

#### The Grape Wine Bar & Gourmet Bistro

The Grape's Wine Bar is an inviting gathering place with both indoor and outdoor seating. The Wine Bar entices guests to taste the same wines available for purchase in the Seller next door, along with specialty-prepared gourmet fare, including spreads, appetizers, entrees and desserts, to match the wine selections. The Grape also features live entertainment during the week. (407) 351-5815

#### The Oceanaire Seafood Room

The Oceanaire Seafood Room, which was founded in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1998, is the nation's first power seafood dining concept. The restaurant offers an inviting, high-energy atmosphere and features a spacious and comfortable dining room. The Oceanaire® Seafood Room offers ultra-fresh seafood and shellfish flown in daily from around the world. Prices for entrees start at \$13 and the average price per guest check is \$45-60. Private and semi-private dining is available. Reservations are encouraged. Valet parking is complimentary. (407) 363-4801

#### Tommy Bahama's Tropical Café

After shopping for a great outfit or that perfect home décor item, guests can enjoy the island-inspired cuisine and full service bar at Tommy Bahama's Tropical Café. Dine on the award-winning Tommy's World Famous Coconut Shrimp, Trinidad Ahi Tuna and mouthwatering Pina Colada Cake, while a Tommy Bahama's Bungalow Brew quenches your thirst. Tommy Bahama's Tropical Café is best described as 'eclectic with a tropical twist' and the perfect place to recharge or unwind. (321) 281-5888

**For the latest in legislative and governmental news, call the American Council of the Blind's "Washington Connection" toll-free at (800) 424-8666, 5 p.m. to midnight Eastern time, or visit the Washington Connection online at <http://www.acb.org>.**

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**INSIDEOUT** is published in, October, March, and June. Material to be published of interest to the membership is welcome. All material to be included must be received prior to the first of the month prior to publication. Items for publication should be sent to: Don Brown, Editor [dlb723@comcast.net](mailto:dlb723@comcast.net)

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