

Struggle, Sacrifice, and Strength

“In itself, homosexuality is as limiting as heterosexuality: The ideal should be to be capable of loving a woman or a man; either, a human being, **without feeling fear, restraint or obligation.**” - Simone de Beauvoir

My Spring Break trip to San Francisco offered me the extraordinary opportunity to visit and engage in the culture of what is perhaps the best-known LGBTQ community in the world: the Castro. As I traversed its rainbow-tiled crosswalks, people-watched at crowded coffeehouses, and ambled past buzzing boutiques, I was struck by how bright, how vivid, and how *alive* the neighborhood seemed to be. Subconsciously, I began to compare it to our hometown analogue of Montrose, which was relatively diffuse and furtive, as if concealed in shadow. Why did the Castro seem devoid of any negative sentiment whatsoever? Not until I paid homage to the GLBT History Museum was I able to acknowledge and pay my respects to those bravest individuals who stepped into the spotlight of public opinion for the Technicolor reality of this San Franciscan district – and by extension, our community as a whole.

It was neither size nor popularity that drew me to the museum; in fact, I wandered the single room and hallway alone that afternoon. But preserved on its walls were gripping memoirs of a hauntingly familiar era: wild stories of clandestine nightclubs and dancehalls, retellings of coming-out narratives to traditionally conservative families, flamboyantly colorful advertisements for drag shows and pride parades. Surrounded by the overwhelmingly triumphant photos of love and laughter, I momentarily lost sight of our oft-repeated history of danger and discrimination. And in this safe, compassionate environment, I began to more fully understand

both how my identification as a gay individual could benefit the LGBTQ community and, in return, how the community could benefit me.

In accepting the truth of their identities, in being unapologetic to a skeptical society, and in pushing the boundaries of convention so that they could live their lives to the fullest extent, these everyday heroes of the LGBTQ movement's earlier years paved the way for radical and vital social and political change. Without intention, they became soldiers fighting a war against intolerance. To me, being LGBTQ means that I am already part of this united front. Our enemy is not a specific person or groups of people; rather, our battle is ideological and is directed toward ideas that are incompatible with equality, opportunity, and diversity. We fight not with violence and weapons, but with understanding and wisdom. Learning more about the historical background behind the sunny streets of the Castro introduced me not only to the compatriots I didn't know that I had, but also to the kindnesses, the generousities, and the blessings that we shared with one another just by being ourselves. In fact, it is perhaps the purest form of synergy; when we help others, we help ourselves as well.

I include the quote by Simone de Beauvoir at the beginning of this piece as a reminder of what I believe love should be: "free from fear, restraint, and obligation". For too long has our community has been associated with these negative qualities and worse. But when we look back at our happiest stories and triumphs, we are empowered to do so much more for our community and our global society. We see that it is always better to be out, to be true, and to be real. I will never forget my time in the Castro; even long my departure from San Francisco, I have never been more proud to be an LGBTQ individual.