REMARKS ON THE OCCASION OF PALOMAR COLLEGE’S PRIDE EVENT

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By Peter Gach, Professor Emeritus

Thank you for inviting me to this PRIDE event. I never thought that I would live long enough to be ‘historical’ – you might say *I’m so historical I’m hysterical!*

So… how old am I?

-I’m so old, I can remember my grandparents’ using work horses on their farm.

-I’m so old I can remember using an outhouse to go to the bathroom.

-I am so old I can remember our family getting our first television with a tiny black and white screen in an enormous cabinet.

-I’m so old I can remember sitting in the front seat of a car at the age of five without a seat belt – cars didn’t have seatbelts (nor air-conditioning!)

-I’m so old that I can remember a time when everyone smoked cigarettes, everywhere, including on planes.

-I’m so old I can remember a time when there were no gay people, at least not in rural southern Indiana where I grew up.

-I’m so old that I thought I was the only person who was different in a fundamental way, and I knew I was different from about the age of 3.

How did I get from growing up in the closet the - only possible option I knew of in the 1950’s and 60’s - to being openly gay in 1982 (yes, 40 years ago!) at Palomar College? I can’t claim to be the only gay person at Palomar in 1982. I can only claim to have arrived at Palomar determined not go back into a closet I had only recently left.

Without giving you a detailed description of my life story (which would take lots more of your time than necessary) let me tell you that I arrived at Palomar having come out a short time before. I had been married. Coming out while still married was the result of a tremendous pressure inside me to discover who I was. You see, I am an artist, a pianist. One of the foundations of my artistry is to tell the truth through my playing - first to myself, and then to the world – no matter what the consequences. So, at the age of 28, having been married to a woman for 7 years, I finally admitted to my wife and my family that I was gay. In the process, I watched the relationship with my former wife turn on her side into bitterness and hate. I lost, temporarily, the good will of Polish American Catholic parents, and most tragically, I lost contact with my child. At this time, it was quite common for gay fathers who came out to have their children taken away from them. I was not alone in this, sadly. I would be unwillingly and forcibly separated from my son for nine long, difficult and painful years.

I won’t burden you with the details of the battle I fought to be reunited with him. I’ll only say that we were reunited when he was 13. One of the most joyful memories of my time at Palomar was introducing my son to the audience at a summer concert I played in the courtyard of the D building just a little way from here in the summer of 1992. I raised him as a single Gay Father and saw him through his high school years.

But let’s get back to my first week at Palomar. As I said, I was determined NEVER to go back into the closet again. I had experienced, to quote a New York Times recent article about Mayor Ed Koch the “exhaustion of perpetual camouflage.” I had stood in front of what felt like an enormous stone wheel attempting to roll over me, telling me I had to obey rules which, if I were to truly obey them would mean perpetual semi-death, a life half-lived. So that first week of teaching in the fall of 1982, I went to the office of the late Dr. Brenda Montiel, who was then Chairperson of the Music Department, and told her I was gay. I said that if that was a problem, I would quit the job at Palomar then and there, because this was not something I was willing to hide. She said she and the department had no problem with it but said that they might tease me about it. My response was that after all I had gone through to come out of the closet, teasing was unacceptable. To their credit, there was no teasing.

There were older gay men who knew me, some of whom were at Palomar, and who knew of my intention to come out at the College. They told me I couldn’t do it. It was too dangerous. That it was better to be discreet, as they had been, or to just compartmentalize my ‘gay side’ and not cause any offense. In their generation discretion and compartmentalization were the only way to survive. But for me being ‘discreet’ was not an option.

A few years after starting teaching here, I was approached by a student named Tony Aguirre along with some other students with a request to become the Faculty Sponsor of a Gay Student Club – a first on campus. Let me say that prior to this, the campus had already included the phrase ‘sexual orientation’ in the Non-Discrimination Statement that appeared in the College Catalog. And by the way, one of the first things prospective gay students did when looking at schools to attend back in the 1980’s was to search out the Non-Discrimination Statement to see if the words ‘sexual orientation’ were included. Let me express my thanks to the College President at the time, Omar Scheidt and the Faculty Senate for facilitating the inclusion of that phrase, which made it just a little safer for students coming to Palomar.

We put together a petition to become a Student Club under the name of GALA – the Gay and Lesbian Association and submitted it to the administration. This was in 1985. Dr. George Boggs was just beginning his tenure as President at the time. When the form came across his desk, he noticed that there were two new student clubs that were up for approval – one of them was a Gay student club. At the time, approval for student clubs was part of the Board of Trustees public agenda, and subject to public discussion. Dr. Boggs went to the Board and proposed that rather than taking their time up with such a tedious task as approving student clubs, they could just let him do it. The Board agreed.

And so quietly, and without drawing public attention and risking negative reaction, Dr. Boggs personally approved the forming of the Gay student club.

The club’s activities were not without some negative response on campus – posters announcing club activities were frequently torn down or defaced. I occasionally got hate mail, sent to my home address. But the administration was consistently supportive, posters were replaced, and club activities went on.

A year after our founding, I and the student members marched in the annual San Diego Pride Parade with a large GALA banner, marking the first time that Palomar College was represented in the Parade. It was indeed a proud moment.

Starting in 1986, I was invited by Linda Locklear, along with Terry Humphrey and Karen Huffman, to appear on panels as part of the Human Sexuality Courses they were teaching at Palomar. I usually appeared with a woman. For many in the class, it was the first time they had actually come face to face with openly gay people. After the classes were over, the students wrote reaction papers describing their feelings about the panel. I received copies of the reaction papers, with the names of the students removed, so that they were completely anonymous me. I knew neither their names nor their gender. Let me quote you a few of them, to get a flavor of the 1980’s.

*…They seemed perfectly normal …there wasn’t really anything different about them compared to non-gay people. I’ve never listened to their point of view before and I agree there’s not much difference. I still don’t agree with it but I understand where they’re coming from. Listening to them and actually seeing them I wouldn’t be able to tell if they were gay or not.*

*…Having the homosexuals talk in class helped me to understand them more. I’ve never had a chance to listen to one before. I’m still against it. I do think you should keep bringing them in, it helped my understanding and my outward tolerance of them.*

*…What I thought was very odd was I pictured a homosexual man looking feminine, dressed up very soft, and the woman very strong and dominating. But that was not the case at all.*

*…After hearing the gay point of view, my eyes were opened on some stereotypes I was accustomed to believing in the past. They didn’t come in limp wristed and lisping, but as common, everyday people. I thought about what it might be like to be in these people’s shoes for just one day. It’s a scary world out there of you’re not straight and so-called ‘normal’ …We will always have prejudices as long as we have ignorance”*

As my years at Palomar rolled by – 10 years became 20 became 30 – progress and acceptance grew, both at Palomar and in the general culture. Gay students here observed National Coming Out Day, the club sponsored a Performance of One-Act plays in cooperation with the Performing Arts Department to raise money for Fraternity House, the North County AIDS hospice. Students organized regular social events, frequently at my home. Palomar approved health and employee benefits for Domestic Partners. I and the students organized a panel of older gay people to discuss what life was like ‘before.’

So here we are, at Palomar College with a Pride Center for LGBTQ students, this great event, and a place where Students, Faculty and Staff are free to be who they are without fear or shame.

Will it always be this way? Can we afford to be complacent? There are, in our current political climate, ominous signs that the rights we as gay people were ‘given’ could just as easily be ‘taken away.’ The reasoning of the recently leaked Supreme Court draft of the decision reversing Roe v. Wade contains legal justifications that could easily be used to roll back the decision on gay marriage, make same sex intimacy illegal, and allow the discrimination in work and housing that so many in the generation before me were forced to live with.

There are currently some 280 anti LGBTQ pieces of legislation being proposed in state legislatures around the country. One of the justifications for Russia’s invasion of the Ukraine was to eliminate ‘decadence’ and uphold ‘traditional values’ - a dog-whistle for anti-LGBTQ attitudes. There are those who want to take back control over – to quote Jamelle Bouie – “However you might live and who you might love. Freedom for some and obedience for the rest.”

What can we do? VOTE, make sure you are registered to vote, and vote in each and every election. Support those candidates for public office who support you. Come out! Talk to people face to face – not, please, by text message, and without your cell phone, but **face to face**.

Coming out is still a process that many people must go through, and I know it’s important to choose the right time and place and be ready for any and all consequences that might result. But each time someone comes out, it makes it just that much easier for those who are not yet ready to fully embrace who they are and share it with the world. You can watch the monologue by comedian Jerrod Carmichael titled “Rothaniel” currently streaming on HBO for a very contemporary look at what coming out is like today.

Let me end on a personal observation about how far we’ve come. In 2009 my son and his fiancée invited ME to attend the San Diego Gay Pride Parade with them, not the other way around! And I am the happy, proud grandfather of an 8-year-old. I often tell her that I am her “fairy grandfather” – this leads to some very interesting discussion, as you can imagine. My identity as a gay person is folded into a rich and complex life that I’ve had the luck to live these 72 years.

My profound gratitude to all those at Palomar: Students, Faculty, Administration and Staff who have been supportive and assisted in making Palomar College a safe place for all. Sometimes we knock down walls, sometimes we open closet doors, sometimes we open a window. We move toward creating a place where each of us has the freedom to be the unique person we are – the gift of our unique humanity to this world into which we are born.

The philosopher Descartes said “Cogito, ergo sum” - I think, therefore I am.

And I say

**I AM OUT, THEREFORE I AM!**