

Same-sex but not "gay"

Many teens and young adults with same-sex attractions don't want a label—especially of the "gay" or "lesbian" kind

By Eileen Spillane

Eve Lincoln, 19, lives in New Windsor, N.Y., and dates women, but she doesn't call herself a lesbian. "I am in no category," says Lincoln, who is interning this summer for the information and educational technology division at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, N.Y. "I date people—not genders, not bodies with certain genitalia, [but] strictly people with whom I feel a connection and to whom I am attracted."

Her rejection of the word *lesbian*, she says, has mostly to do with straight people: "Most labels today have 'heterosexual' as the base and then everything else is deviant of it. If I do not label myself by a label created by society, then I am denying them that heterosexual privilege."

Caitlin Grillo, 20, from Volcano, Calif., doesn't want to be called "lesbian" either. "So many other things make up who I am—like my dancing, my age, my political activism, where I'm from," says Grillo, a double major in dance and sociology/anthropology at Virginia's Randolph-Macon Woman's College. "Someone can define me if they want, but I will correct them if it's not accurate."

The words *gay* and *lesbian* may be going the way of Latin, as a growing number of teens and college-age students say they are rejecting any kind of label. Other terms on the endangered list: *bisexual*, *bulldozer*, *bear*, *cub*, *butch*, *queer*, *dyke*, *flamer*, *faggot*, *fairy*, *fag bangle*, *bungie boy*—make that *boi*—and *baby dyke*.

"I walk down the street knowing that I am myself and there is no one like me and that I do not belong in a category with certain people," says Lincoln. "That doesn't make me feel one bit uncomfortable. It's OK to be unsure, it's OK not to belong, and it's OK to be in that gray area. Most of us are."

With so many mind-bending ways to label oneself, the members of Generation Y

who spoke to *The Advocate* say they feel confused, overwhelmed, and trapped if they settle on one term. They're also inclined to scrap the decades-old idea of coming out and officially telling friends and family to call them "gay," "lesbian," or "bisexual."

It's not just exhaustion. On a deeper level, they are more likely to associate such terms with being a staunch political activist or a member of the generation that came out during the 1960s and 1970s, says Bill Leap, anthropology professor and chairman at American University in Washington, D.C.

Since 1993, Leap has held the annual Lavender Languages and Linguistics conference, where those attending debate how lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgenders, and queers use language in everyday life and how language gets used against us by others. Even in the classroom the professor has noticed a shift in how gay

and lesbian students describe themselves.

For some, the words *gay* and *lesbian* carry political baggage. "Some [students] are not political," Leap says. "They're saying '[I] like to party. I don't see anything political in sucking dick.'"

Meanwhile, some women and minority youths with same-sex attractions feel the words *gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual* represent only rich

white men, Leap adds. At the same time, many of Leap's male students don't want to be called "gay" due to their unwarranted fears that people will think that they have AIDS. Leap blames that stereotype on the far right's effective job in stigmatizing the disease by making the connection to gay men. "I don't think this is a cultural accident," he says.

Alex Mann of Lynchburg, Va., an out 17-year-old high school student, notes that there is more to him than being



■ Caitlin Grillo (left), with Eve Lincoln, doesn't want to be labeled a "lesbian."

gay. "I don't mind the term *gay*, but I don't like the stereotypes that come along with the word," he says. "Typical stereotypes of a gay man don't define every one, and one should look at the bigger picture."

The term *homosexuality* was coined in a German book in 1869 and first appeared in English in 1892, according to the cul- ▶

SHARP TONGUE

"I think your generation is great, 'cause they don't care if you're gay or straight—it's not that it makes any difference. It's much hipper...much, much hipper for gay people."

—John Waters, on a June 21 "podcast" from FeastOfFools.net





tural encyclopedia *GLBTQ*. For nearly a century after being categorized by disapproving heterosexuals, homosexuals were medicalized and stigmatized, forced to defend their sexuality, their normality, and their sanity.

The rise of the words *gay* and *lesbian* in the mid 20th century were part of our self-defense, an effort to find more positive labels. *Lesbian* came from the connection between the woman-loving ancient Greek poet Sappho and the island of Lesbos. Gertrude Stein is often credited with popularizing the word *gay* as another word for homosexuality in the early 1920s, in her short story “Miss Furr and Miss Skeene,” although the word’s usage was not widespread until the 1950s and ’60s.

The growing rejection of those words by young people represents another cultural shift, which may not sit well with older gays and lesbians. Leap has heard plenty of GLBT baby boomers make fun of the younger generation’s new labels or desire to be completely label-free, and he says that’s dangerous. He reasons that such dismissal divides GLBT Americans and allows the religious right to define the discussion on who should be called what.

“We go to the mat on this and continually divide ourselves at a time when the Right is organizing around a very common theme,” he says. “To build consensus we’ve got to be able to figure out what an 18-year-old is thinking, and we’ve got to find a way to respect that and not be threatened by that.” ■

THE ADVOCATE

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