

ROBYN OCHS IS WHAT BISEXUAL LOOKS LIKE

Boston-based Bisexual Resource Center leader and nationally recognized LGBT activist meets with First Husband and First Wife

BY CHUCK COLBERT



(Photo: Marilyn Humphries)

A local bisexual activist is on a roll. Fresh off a European book tour that included stops in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Portugal, Robyn Ochs persists in putting a face on bisexuality. Before the tour, Ochs even made bisexuality visible at the White House when President Obama and First Lady Michelle hosted a Gay Pride party on June 29. Wearing a button reading, “This is what a bisexual looks like,” Ochs and her wife Peg Preble mingled among the 300 VIP LGBT people, all invited guests gathered in the East Room to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion.

In marking the birth of grassroots activism, Obama became the first president ever to host a reception for LGBT people in the White House. Peg and Robyn made the guest list, with Ochs representing BiNet USA (www.binetusa.org), a nationwide umbrella organization, and the Boston-based Bisexual Resource Center (www.biresource.net).

In the East Room, Peg seized the moment, introducing Robyn as her “wife” to the First

Husband and First Wife. “They looked into our eyes and shook our hands,” said Ochs recalling the interaction. “Both were so apparently present,” she added. “I was profoundly moved.”

“‘We will get there,’ President Obama assured me,” Ochs said. “I’m not certain whether his ‘there’ is exactly the same as my ‘there,’ but I believe him.”

Getting “there” for Ochs requires a passionate commitment to public education about the phenomenon of bisexuality, a complex but understandable component of human sexual diversity.

Hers is a good karma, a non-confrontational, and pleasantly persistent, advocacy. “The job of a bisexual activist—and allies—is to keep reminding people in a loving but firm way” that “bisexual and transgender people really do exist and are part the LGBT community — have been and will be” she said. Better yet, “the vast majority of lesbians and gay men are now fully aware” of that reality.

“We’ve made a lot of progress,” Ochs said, recalling “the bad old days” when the response she got as a bi activist sounded something like this: “What are you doing here in our community? Why are you diluting our community? You have different needs. Go make your own movement.”

By definition a bisexual orientation is the innate tendency to direct sexual desire to both sexes. Why is that difficult for some people to understand? “The human mind migrates to oversimplifying gay-straight binaries,” Ochs explained recently over lunch at her Jamaica Plain home. “It’s hard to remember that [gay and straight] are just locations,” not necessarily destinations along a continuum of a more “fluid” understanding of sexual orientation.

Her own life story is illustrative. “Looking back over time, you see the long string of boyfriends in high school and college,” she explained. Then, in college, Ochs said, “I fell head over heels for a woman, who to this day still doesn’t know! But I did

acknowledge to myself that I had both same- and other-sex attraction. Then, at age 23, my first real live girlfriend! From then on, it was serial monogamy: another woman, a man, a woman, a man."

Next, came "six years of intentional celibacy, a condition I fondly refer to as being in a primary relationship with myself," she said.

At age 38, however, Ochs met Peg. They have been together for the past 12 years and were legally married on May 17, 2004, the first day Goodridge took effect, making same-sex marriage legal in Massachusetts.

On the outside, Robyn and Peg may seem to onlookers like a lesbian couple. Her spouse identifies as a lesbian, Ochs said. And yet Ochs has identified as bisexual for 33 years—at least "so far."

A true pioneer in bisexual activism and visibility, Ochs' accomplishments include co-founding Boston's Bisexual Women's Network and the local bisexual resource organization. She has taught gender and sexuality studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Tufts University, and Johnson State College in Vermont. Ochs also

co-edited the international anthology *Getting Bi: Voices of Bisexuals Around the World*.

The book's second edition rolled off the press just in time for this past summer's book tour. While in Denmark, Ochs stopped off in Copenhagen for the international Human Rights conference, held last July in conjunction with World Outgames 2009. There, Ochs moderated a plenary session all about the rights and differences of a global LGBT community.

Closer to home, the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force honored Ochs with the Susan J. Hyde Activism Award for longevity in the movement. "We hear your clear voice, we see your staunch advocacy, and we respond to your loving insistence that our movement include all of us," said the Task Force's Sue Hyde, in presenting the award bearing her name last winter in Denver at the organization's annual Creating Change conference. Based in Cambridge, Hyde is the conference director.

Ochs has engaged in bisexual activism in her spare time since 1982, but not anymore: "I left my regular job a week before

my 50th birthday so I could say I retired in my 40s," she said jokingly on June 4, 2009, in accepting a lifetime achievement award from the Harvard Gay & Lesbian Caucus, an LGBT alumni organization, at its annual commencement dinner. The Caucus recognized Ochs for her many contributions in putting the "B" into LGBT community life at Harvard. And, she said, "I wanted to become a full time activist."

Hot off a European tour, a White House visit, and two awards recognizing her tireless work in the LGBT movement, what is next for fulltime bisexual activist Robyn Ochs, speaker and lecturer? "I want Massachusetts to have a vanity license plate: 'the equality state' or 'the state of equality,'" she said. "It's a nice idea but we haven't yet earned it." She added, "When the transgender bill [to add gender identity and expression to hate crimes and nondiscrimination statutes] passes and is signed by the governor, then we'll have earned it."

After all, she said, "We are the lesbian, gay, bisexual — and transgender community." ♦