

April

LILLI'S OPEN HOUSE CELEBRATES 5TH ANNIVERSARY

"Are you going to Open House on Wednesday?" "Have you ever been to Lilli's Open House?" In the lesbian community in D.C., there are few women who would not know what was meant by "Lilli's Open House." In fact a question like that might be one way of opening an exploratory conversation with an acquaintance you are not sure is gay.

Every Wednesday gay and bisexual women from all around the metropolitan area gather at the home of Lilli Vincens for an evening of friendly talk. Women have driven from Annapolis and West Virginia to seek the support that such a setting offers. It has become for many an alternative to the bars, a way to meet other women in a safe environment where you can feel comfortable in talking about your experiences.

On March 10, the Open House celebrated its 5th Anniversary. Every single Wednesday for the past five years, Lilli has opened her house. Literally hundreds of women have come there--~~some only once~~ or twice, others many times. All kinds of women but all sharing the common bond of loving women and of seeking others who can understand and share these feelings.

Open House had its roots in the ~~Whammy~~ "for Congress" campaign in 1971. Frank Kameny ran for Congress on an independent ticket as an open gay. This created a great deal of local publicity. Many lesbians began calling the Mattachine Society, which was actively working on the campaign, looking for ways to meet and talk with other women. Lilli was the only lesbian in Mattachine who had an open phone number so these women were referred to her. Because she found she did not have time to meet with these women individually, she and her lover at the time decided to set aside a time each week for these women to get together. Thus Open House was born.

The Fifth Anniversary celebration was in many ways typical of most Open Houses. It was a mixture of old and new faces, the young and the not-so-young, those just coming out and those who had been out for several years. One couple who had met at Open House exactly

one year before came to celebrate their own anniversary. One woman sang some of her own compositions. Conversations sprang up among the numerous small groups around the living room. Sometimes talk centered on some aspect of the gay experience and other times it touched on such diverse topics as job-hunting and sports.

As I observed the group that evening, my mind ranged back to a night almost two years ago when I had made my first visit to Open House. I remember being scared to death. It was the first time I had publicly declared that I was a lesbian, and it became a very important step in my personal liberation.

That first evening was not an easy one. I spent a lot of time by the literature rack reading magazine articles and pamphlets. People were friendly enough, but no one really pushed me to get involved in a discussion. This, I think, is part of the beauty of Lilli's approach and the tone the Open House has taken. The support is there and yet you have to make the move yourself to seek out and take advantage of it. It comes as a bit of a shock to find that many of the other women are as new to gay scene and as confused and scared as you are. The combination of this new group and those who are more self-assured and more at home is very comforting.

There are always new faces there. This really points out the importance of the service the Open House provides. As one woman commented, this shows that "Lilli continues to fulfill her goal of an 'alternative' meeting place for gay women...and we, as gay women, continue to see how many new women constantly emerge...come out."

Lilli is quick to point out the positive aspect for herself. She has a sense of making a valuable contribution to the lesbian community, a fact no one can dispute. She says that it has been a "nice thing personally because I have met so many wonderful and interesting people."

The many old friends who joined the new-comers at the 5th Anniversary were a tribute to what the Open House means to the lesbians in Washington. To that I must add my personal thanks that Lilli's Open House was there at a time when I desperately needed something to latch onto. Thanks, Lilli.