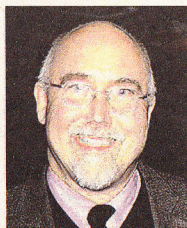


BTL@20: Looking Back At The Early Years



BY TIM RETZLOFF

I became involved with BTL at the outset thanks to David Rosenberg. I met David at his portable massage table at what was then called PrideFest at Oakland Community College in Royal Oak. In early 1993, David mentioned that his friend Mark was looking to start a new gay newspaper.

As it happened, another local gay paper called the Michigan Tribune (formerly Ten Percent) had just suspended publication when its publisher Steve Culver moved to San Francisco. Southeast Michigan had a vacuum, and Mark Weinstein (now known as MaxZine) set out to fill it. I was eager to join in.

Mark was a 27-year-old Radical Faerie of Jewish heritage originally from suburban New York and something of a refugee from high school in Iowa. He moved to Ann Arbor in the early 1980s to attend the University of Michigan but dropped out to pursue radical queer and anti-militarist activism. In 1990, Mark, his boyfriend Spree Vance, and David Rosenberg formed ACT UP/Ann Arbor.

Between The Lines started out of Mark's bedroom at Heiwa House, a progressive, vegetarian co-op on Hill Street in Ann Arbor. I was 29 at the time, still living in my hometown of Flint, and new to sporting a goatee, which was then much the style. Being a coney-loving Flint kid, I was enthralled with Heiwa. I'd never heard of a vegan before. Whenever I visited, the large house felt like the quiet aftermath of a wild hippie party. I came to adore the residents I met there: Gaia who later ran for Washtenaw sheriff on the Green Party ticket, Cecilia who juggled and rode a unicycle, and dear, dear Mark.

A printer in Northville disapproved of the paper and refused to print the first issue, but this didn't deter Mark. He established the paper's identity early on with two cover articles. In one, BTL exposed the straight owners of Maxie's nightclub for featuring a homophobic rapper at another venue they owned. The other defining article gave an account of the "Revolting Queers" who staged a guerilla protest at a Republican fundraiser in Southfield for Senate minority leader

and presidential contender Bob Dole. This BTL was independent from the bars and fiercely leftist. I was probably the most conservative person involved.

After running the paper for a year, Mark passed the reins to BTL writer Shannon Rhoades at a blowout party and performance at the anarchist theater space Trumbullplex. Shannon took the paper to new heights, fostering a true community publication. She and Julie Enszer, both graduates of U of

M, convened an editorial board that met monthly in the Pioneer Building, the old location of Affirmations on Nine Mile in Ferndale. Among the board members were Curtis Lipscomb, who was just launching a small magazine called Kick!; Carla Gillard, who took me to meet her bashful uncle, a onetime acolyte of Prophet Jones; and John Burchett, who was co-chair with Shea Howell of the Michigan Campaign for Human Dignity, a coalition assembled to combat a statewide anti-gay ballot measure. As a group we decided the content of each issue and volunteered to write stories.

I remember on more than one occasion writing at the computer site in U of M's North University Building, popularly known as NUBS, as Shannon raced to wrap up an issue. Among the topics BTL covered over the twenty months under the helm of Shannon and Julie were teens with AIDS, gay and lesbian teachers coming out in the classroom, Full Truth Unity Fellowship Church, heretofore unsung Ten Influential Queers of 1995, and the shotgun murder of Scott Amedure by Jonathan Schmidt after the two appeared on a Jenny Jones talk show segment about secret crushes.

And Matt Ostrander and I interviewed Craig Covey, he of the solid biceps, during his first run for Ferndale City Council. Even though we represented the gay press and knew the candidate from his regular Covey's Corner column in our very paper, we did not hold back on tough questions. Craig impressed me with his answers and proved himself ready for elective office.

When Susan Horowitz and Jan Stevenson took over the paper in late 1995, I had the good fortune to be hired on in the part-time position of assistant editor. From the basement of their home in Farmington, BTL became truly a statewide paper and much more mainstream. By then I was

probably the most liberal person involved.

Over the next year and a half, it chronicled the tragic ouster and premature death of Byron Center music teacher Gerry Crane, Detroit's first Hotter Than July celebration, the battle to pass and later

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secure by referendum a gay civil rights ordinance in Ypsilanti, and the hate slaying of Lansing State Journal sports writer Bob Gross.

It also ran, sit-down interviews with the mayors of Ann Arbor, Flint, Grand Rapids, and Lansing, and a landmark interview with Allan Gilmour in which the retired Ford vice president came out as gay.

In my four and a half total years with BTL, I wrote on a range of topics, from an early two-part series about coming out online, to a profile of Team Great Lakes preparing for Gay Games IV, to an account written with Anne Harris about a day in the life of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Program's Office (now the Spectrum Center) at the University of Michigan. I once shaved my goatee to go undercover for a legislative agenda briefing at the State Capitol held by the Citizens for Traditional Values. On occasion I even got to share some LGBT history. My favorite story, however, remains the 1996 profile I did of Pat Teal and Phyllis Erb, a longtime lesbian couple then finishing a five-year adventure of running a bed-and-breakfast in Gaylord.

Since I left in August 1997, Susan and Jan (with the phenomenal help of managing editor Cheryl Zupan) took the paper biweekly and then weekly. Theirs is an astounding achievement. Through two decades, they've sustained the paper while the American press has been in crisis. Over twenty years, Between The Lines has served as a vital institution in our community, documenting change that was barely fathomable in 1993 when a vivacious Radical Faerie decided to start a gay newspaper. I am ever proud to have witnessed its beginnings and played a small part in its history.

Tim Retzloff, a Lansing resident and a Ph.D. candidate at Yale, is currently finishing his dissertation on gay and lesbian life in metropolitan Detroit from 1945 to 1985.