

Bears & Health

Size is a Political Issue, Part 2

In Part 1, we began looking at the issue of fat preference, as it exists in the world of straight and bi men and women and lesbians. Clearly, women are bears—BBW (Big Beautiful Women), as they are called by their admirers—as are lesbians. We also began discussion of the many subtle and not so subtle ways in which persons of size, especially women, are discriminated against in the workplace as well as in society at large. In the world of women, where sexism is such a great and multifaceted problem, fat discrimination often presents as garden-variety sexism, just as it may be couched within a more generalized homophobia for gay bears and chubs and for lesbians of size.

In discussion with my Gen X bisexual buddy Lavelle (introduced in Part 1), and reading the NAAFA website history, information and position statements, I've learned a lot more. Just as women experience sexism in many other forms, they experience discrimination with regard to their weight more than men. For the most part a man can get away with being heavyset more easily than a woman, where the standards and expectations for appearance are otherwise unequal. It's like the old situation of stewardesses. Before workplace discrimination lawyers got involved, they were expected to be "young" and "trim" and "pretty." Today, they no longer need to be "young" or nec-

essarily "pretty." If they're heavyset, however, they can still be discriminated against.

More recently I heard another airline story, about a Black man of size who was informed that he would have to purchase two seats because he couldn't fit into the sardine seats currently available. [Some airlines do refund the cost of the second seat if the plane is not full.] Apart from a very few scattered ordinances specifying height and weight along with race, sex, gender and sexual orientation, there are virtually no laws to protect persons of size from discrimination in the workplace, or anywhere else. The only other venue open to persons of size for recognition and accommodation of special needs is to claim medical disability.

In addition to a wide range of cautionaries around the often very serious health risks of weight-loss drugs and of obesity surgery, here are some of the observations and position statements of NAAFA, which you can browse in greater detail on their website. NAAFA

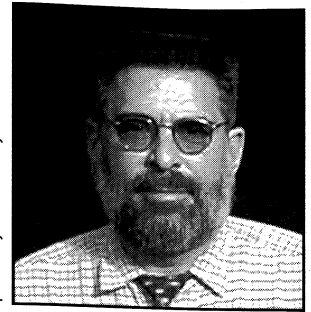
*) asserts that the primary goal of obesity research should be to improve the health and well-being of fat people, rather than [solely] to promote weight loss.

*) advocates that obesity researchers study cultural bias against fat people and ways to reduce that bias.

*) believes that in a society where nearly 55% of the population is con-

Lawrence D. Mass, M.D., is a co-founder of Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City and the author/editor of four books, including, most recently, *We Must Love One Another Or Die: The Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer* (St. Martin's Press). You may address questions or comments to Dr. Mass via our mailing address or Email address.

photo by Joel Bradley



sidered fat, a preference for a fat partner is normal and should be encouraged rather than discouraged.

*) advocates that literature for children...and that the media represent fat people as normal, desirable, and as love interests.

*) advocates that height and weight be included as a protected category in existing state, local and federal civil rights statutes.

*) advocates the introduction, passage and enactment of additional local, state and federal laws to ensure protection against size discrimination in employment, education, housing and public accommodation.

Sound familiar? Gay people have a long history of direct experience with fighting discrimination, great and small, with efforts and losses and victories great and small. Being gay is by no means identical to being a person of size. And being overweight may not be optimally "normal" or "healthy" by some standards. At the same time, prejudice and bias are as "normal" and also as American as apple pie, and there is no more reason to tolerate them for persons of size than there has been for gay people.