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'Cut Sleeve' Provides A Vital Voice For Gay Asian America

By Gerard Lim

"Coming out of the closet." Outside of the gay, lesbian and bisexual realms, this catch-phrase has long created a bustling discomfort among fundamentalist America, which actively promotes so-called "family values." And everyone must know you can't have a (nuclear) family without a mom and a dad, now can we?

Asian America, with its rich traditions firmly entrenched — some might even refer to it as a patriarchy tinged with rampant homophobia — is still learning about this purported homosexual underworld. Fact of the matter is gays and lesbians pervade our everyday lives. They are our bosses and workers, friends and enemies, brothers and sisters.

So why the distrust? The incorrect belief that members of the homosexual world are perverted and, therefore, somewhat unbalanced individuals has lent a sense of caution whenever homosexuals find themselves in the company of gays and/or lesbians.

With Asian Pacific Americans, the problem is compounded by the pervasive belief that homosexuality is strictly a white "phenomenon." Terms like "shame" and "saving face" often become synonymous in discussions involving gay people, Asian or otherwise, as though an acceptable amount of embarrassment should come with the territory.

It is somewhat comforting, therefore, to see works such as "Cut Sleeve," a video docuforum produced by San Franciscan Nikos Diaman, author of five gay novels over the past decade. His books — "Ed Dean Is Queer," "The Fourth Wall," "Second Crossing," "Reunion" and his recent "Castro Street Memories" — have served as something of a springboard for "Cut Sleeve."

The 24-minute work is spare and the production minimalist. Most importantly, however, it treats its subjects — a pool of gay and lesbian Asian Pacific Americans — as simply everyday people, which is what they are. Gays and lesbians are not circus sideshows and should not be treated as such seems to be "Cut Sleeve's" running theme.

Many of Diaman's subjects, most of whom appear to be in their 30's, convey the difficulty of opening up to their parents in eloquent, almost bittersweet manner. One lesbian recalled how her father reacted with outrage after seeing several Asian Pacific Americans marching in the gay parade. Another remembered how she approached her Asian mother to tell her, "Mom, I'm lesbian," to which her mother, with her arms crossed, reacted with "I know."

One gay man tells of how he thought distance — both physical and emotional — would allow him to lead the life he was meant to lead. "Parents won't find out you're gay or lesbian if you're far away" was his shelter. This denial is something no one should have to experience in our so-called modern society.

A Japanese American lesbian says, "I grew up Japanese ... but I didn't know what part of that is mine ... because there's parts of that I don't want to keep."

Throughout "Cut Sleeve," you get the sense that there people are being forced to fight an uphill battle along two fronts: against racial and sexual discrimination.

As a result, many of these thirty-somethings recall their younger, college days when they were subject to a predominantly white (not to mention heterosexual) community. As a result, many of them found themselves trying to be white. Yet another sacrifice — of one's own heritage — for this subjugated bunch.

Chastised or disowned by their culture, gay and lesbian Asian Pacific Americans also often find themselves unappreciated or unwanted within homosexual circles. When an APA walks into a gay bar, he or she is just waiting for a snide comment, such as "What are you doing here? You don't belong here." Racism is no stranger among homosexuals.

Ultimately, however, you get the sense that gay and lesbian Asian Pacific Americans are taking steps toward outspokenness and, thus, empowerment. Support, so far, has come from only their community and from inside. In order for the mainstream to embrace the community wholeheartedly, one need only see the potential gifts this group can contribute.

In the meantime, as Asian Pacific American lesbian Donna Keiko Ozawa sings, "Love is what we have to carry on." It is an eye-opening lyric which transcends both racial and sexual boundaries. We should take note.

"Cut Sleeve," by San Franciscan Nikos Diaman, documents gay and lesbian Asian America in a straightforward and minimalist manner.