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Gay America Depicted Through a Gay Lens

By JOSEPH HANANIA

THIS WEEK, "NETWORK Q: OUT Across America," a news omnibus that focuses on gay Americans, will begin its second season on public-television stations in certain spots around the country, and WNET in New York will be one of those stations. Garrison Botts, a programming associate at WNET, said Channel 13 had renewed the program because it "is visually captivating and sexual and fun."

"It's a very grass-roots way of looking at life," he said recently, "giving people a sense of community across the country and providing role models for young gay people."

Despite what Mr. Botts calls "excellent response" from viewers, however, WNET has now pushed the late Wednesday night air time for the series half an hour further into the wee hours, to 12:30 AM. But that's a sort of yin and yang that David Surber, the creator and producer of "Network Q," can live with. The 35-year-old Mr. Surber may look a lot like a younger Peter Jennings, but he knows there are big differences between his program and a network news program.

First of all, the eight new half-hour episodes of "Network Q" were produced for a total of about \$30,000 — or less than a network program might spend on a single news segment. Also, Mr. Surber's program is not available to viewers everywhere in the United States. So far, it is being shown only on PBS stations in New York, Miami, Philadelphia, Seattle, Denver, San Francisco, San Mateo, Calif.; Bloomington, Ind., and Tacoma, Wash., on a variety of days and at times ranging from 2 P.M. to those wee hours.

Most important, of course, "Network Q" is a gay program. Whereas traditional news programs filter

reports about homosexuals and lesbians through a predominantly heterosexual lens, "Network Q" presumes a gay orientation and builds from there, said Mr. Surber. "The biggest challenge gay people face is for us to come to terms with ourselves," he said. "It's we who give away our power, and we who can choose to take it back."

The subjects of the stories on "Network Q" illustrate this premise in numerous, often unpredictable ways. In one segment for the new season, for example, a gay radio talk-show host in Cleveland openly wishes he had "more hostile callers" because he would "love to play with them — I thrive on conflict." In another new episode, the publisher of a gay newspaper in Ohio tells of getting more harassment for her political views from homosexuals and lesbians than from heterosexuals.

Last year, in Salt Lake City, the parents of a 21-year-old former missionary who had been banished from his church after revealing his sexual orientation questioned the church's teachings. Fighting for composure, the father wondered, "If my son isn't worthy to be in the church after the kind of Mormon he's been, who is worthy?"

"Network Q" often stands expectations on their head, as Mr. Surber does when he describes his own background.

He grew up in Southern California and gradu-

ated from the University of Colorado. After college, he started an advertising agency in Las Vegas, Nev., with a friend and rapidly saw his income soar into six digits. "I seemed to have all my needs met," he recalled. "I was living the life I thought I was supposed to live. But I was also expending tremendous energy denying who I am."

Five years ago, on Thanksgiving, Mr. Surber told his parents that he was homosexual. "My mother is first-generation Portuguese Catholic-American," he said. "She was simply devastated, as was my father."

Three months later, Mr. Surber used his agency's auspices to create an early version of "Network Q," a series of videotapes sold through The Advocate, a national gay newsmagazine. A year later, Mr. Surber said,

Against the odds, on nine public stations, 'Network Q' enters a second season.

NEW YORK TIMES
8/25/96



David Surber, center, left a successful career...

his partner, fearing that nervous clients might leave the agency, branched off on his own. Mr. Surber had to choose between pursuing a comfortable livelihood or pursuing his dream. He chose the dream.

LIVING ON HIS SAVINGS, MR. SURBER AND A volunteer crew hit the road to interview notable gay figures like the poet Allen Ginsberg, Representative Gerry Studds of Massachusetts and the actress Amanda Bearse of "Married ... With Children." Mr. Surber was intent on transforming "Network Q" into a television series.

Early in 1995, "Network Q" was picked up for distribution by Central Educational Network in Chicago. It was first broadcast on KBDI in Denver in June last year and subsequently appeared on six other stations. Last fall, the program's weekly viewership was estimated at 300,000 households. "Network Q" has gained two more stations for the new season.

Last year, Mr. Surber moved to Atlanta, where he rents the first floor of a house; he uses the front rooms as an office for the program and lives in the back. Although the cost of this fall's episodes have been

largely underwritten by Tanqueray gin, Hilton Hotels and the Colin Higgins Fund, Mr. Surber's savings have dissipated to "fumes," he says. But he plows on. "It's hard not to keep doing it when you get boxes and boxes and boxes of letters, and so many phone calls," he said.

One day last season, someone called Mr. Surber twice but hung up each time before saying anything. On a third try, a scared 16-year-old from Hackensack, N.J., said: "You're the first person I'm telling I'm gay. I'm coming out today, and I need to talk with someone."

"Network Q" has brought Mr. Surber a rapprochement with his own family. "When I told them the show was airing on some PBS stations," he said, "it was the first time in years I heard in their voice they were proud of something I had done. Their tone was still guarded, but it also said, 'Wow, you're doing something with your life.'"

"So perhaps the show started as my own exploration of the gay community," he continued, "and now it's helping restore families, including my own, by allowing each member to come out of hiding and be proud of who he is.

"I'd settle for that."

NYT 8/25/96