

# *From a Fat Dyke . . .*

by Sheena Ann Lawrence

I was born at 1:30 on the afternoon of September 5, 1951. I weighed in at six pounds and began to increase that figure immediately. By the time I started to school I was already more than 50% "overweight" and a prime target for the childish jeers of "Fatty, Fatty, two-by-four. Can't get through the kitchen door." For twelve years of school I was always the heaviest (boys included), ran the slowest, jumped the shortest, did the fewest pull-ups, sit-ups, and every other kind of physical activity we were required to do.

Then came college and I discovered I was a Lesbian. For a few years I was too busy hating myself for being queer to hate myself for being fat. I flunked out of college after two years and moved from the small college town of Montevello, Alabama, to the big city of Birmingham where I lived for the next seven years. I applied for a job with Southern Bell and, although I scored very high on their tests, was told they could not hire me unless I lost seventy pounds. I lost the weight in less than three months, went back to Ma Bell, and was hired immediately. Six weeks later they fired me because of rumors that I was queer. A few months later the pressures of being fat, queer, and broke became more than I was willing to cope with and I attempted suicide.

During the following years I was constantly struggling against a society that was not only homophobic, but also fatophobic. Being a Lesbian was much easier for me than being fat. People couldn't tell I was a Lesbian from looking at me and, let's face it, the lifestyle has some definite rewards. I also received a lot of support and good feedback from my Lesbian and gay friends. Even in Birmingham there were bars I could go to to be around other homosexuals but there were no clubs for Fatties—except those who were trying to lose weight.

I received no support from anyone about my fat. "Fat is ugly," "It's bad for your health," etc. During the time I had lived at home my father convinced me I was a fat, lazy, slob and friends, enemies, and strangers continued to reinforce me in that opinion of myself.

When I went back to school I had to deal with desks that were not designed for my three-hundred-plus pounds. My fat would hang over the sides of the chair on three sides and on the fourth side the writing surface would dig so deeply into the soft fat of my stomach that almost half its width was unusable!

I couldn't take a deep breath, I couldn't shift in the seat, I did not have enough room to write, and most of the time I felt so uncomfortable and humiliated it was hard for me to concentrate on the lecture. I dropped out of school twice because of desks which could not accommodate my bulk.

In addition, public restrooms could be a real problem. Often I had to straddle the toilet before I could close the door. Sometimes I would have to sit off-center because the toilet tissue holders got in the way. There were a few occasions when the situation was simply impossible.

The problems didn't stop there either. I was so ashamed of my body that I hadn't worn shorts or a bathing suit for ten years. I could not count the times I had cried because I was so ashamed of constantly having to rub against people in tight aisles and of taking up so much space on a city bus that no one wanted to sit next to me. When I sat on the aisle my weight compressed the seat so much the outer edge cut painfully into my tail and I partially blocked the aisle.

And in bed? There were a few times—I made sure they were few—when a woman lay beside me humiliated because she didn't know how to deal with my fat and I didn't have the experience to offer suggestions.

I was constantly apologizing for my fat, apologizing for my clumsiness, apologizing for taking up too much space, apologizing for my very existence. I would make jokes about my size, I worked hard to be funny. People like to laugh so I gave them all the laughs I could just to keep from being avoided. I might be crying inside or when I was alone but when people were around I was a one-dyke circus! I hated it and I hated myself!

Somewhere along the line, for whatever reason, I got tired of pretending I would be thin within a year or two. I stopped going on diets, I stopped pretending I was happy but somehow accepted the fact that I was fat. I decided I would rather stay fat than to diet for the rest of my life. The strangest thing was, once I realized the choice was mine, my weight leveled off and I actually lost a few pounds that year and kept them off. I decided my size was nobody's business but my own.

I moved to Atlanta a few years ago and the attitude about fat seems to be a little better here. I faced the small desks again, and the small restrooms and bus seats are still around, but I'm getting hassled less. There are still few people who tell me it's okay to be fat, but the number is growing. Gradually lesbians and women in general are realizing that fat discrimination is an important issue.

I'm walking freer now. I'm holding my head up instead of watching to make sure my left foot and my right foot both walk in the same direction. When I pass people on the sidewalk I keep my head up, my shoulders back, my breasts high, and I meet their eyes. If they wish to look away, fine, but I will not be intimidated. I work at walking free and easy with a bounce in my step and the joy of living in my heart, and my fat swings free and bounces with me. It still hurts, though, when a child says, "Mommie, see the fat lady?" and "Mommie" shuts the child up as if she has said a dirty word. Why should "See the fat lady" be any worse than "See the pretty lady?" I am learning they can be the same.

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**Sheena Lawrence:** I was born and raised in Cullman County, Alabama, a rural area. Recently, a training center for the KKK was discovered there. Raised in that background I had a great deal of trouble valuing myself as a woman and later as a Lesbian.

"From a Fat Dyke" was written for *CLLL* and is my first attempt at writing for publication. In many ways this article is a before-and-after sketch of the changes that have occurred during the almost-a-year I have worked with a Lesbian Feminist Therapist.

People laugh at me for trying to change the world, but my writing is still my attempt to change the world around me even though the change is small.

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