

if one day, very suddenly, every homosexual in America turned blue—and the rest of society saw once and for all just how commonplace (and how unthreatening) homosexuality really is? In truth, the gradual surfacing of Gay America over the past 10 years has nearly fulfilled that wish. If the 1-in-10 estimate is correct, something like 17 million Americans—men and women of all ethnic groups and occupations—are homosexual. Though there are no reliable statistics on the gay population state by state, there is also no doubt that every major city in the country, and many smaller ones, now includes an identifiable subcommunity of avowed gays—and usually a shadow population of those who are, for whatever reasons, still concealing their sexual identity.

San Francisco remains the capital of Gay America—the Emerald City, the gay Oz, a town in which no homosexual need any longer fear coming out. Gays are partners in the business and political establishments; there is a gay chamber of commerce, the Golden Gate Business Association and a gay-and-lesbian thrift institution, the Atlas Savings and Loan Association. Thriving on the gay real-estate boom that has reclaimed hundreds of Victorian homes across the city, Atlas now boasts \$42 million in assets—an indicator of the gay community's rising affluence. If the homosexual demimonde that is so visible on Castro Street has given San Francisco a lurid image to the rest of the nation, the prim neighborhoods of gay-owned Victorians suggest another reality: a solid, hard-working and civic-minded gay middle class that has little in com-

mon with the gaudy campiness of the street people. "The great bulk of the gay population . . . goes to work in the morning and comes home at night, like anybody else," says Mayor Dianne Feinstein. "It runs the political gamut as far as ideology is concerned, and I suspect that, in the majority, it is probably conservative."

Gay communities elsewhere are similarly diverse. "There are highly visible pockets of gays living a particular life-style, but the community is too broad and too wide to categorize," says Judge Failla, describing New York City. "I don't believe there are more artists among gays. There are probably just as many lawyers or construction workers. For the most part, my friends are successful professionals." According to one recent survey of homosexuals in 11 major cities, gays are employed

## Coming Out of the Closet

Deep down, Richard Failla knew he was different. At the age of 11, while his friends whispered about their grade-school sweethearts, he remained silent. "I didn't feel that excitement," he recalls. Worse yet, he found himself physically attracted to boys. Terrified, Failla began sneaking into a public library, where he read whatever he could find on homosexuality. "Everything was negative," he says. "Homosexuality was defined as an illness . . . a deviation . . . a perversion." He repressed his feelings and dated women. He compensated, excelling academically. He was president of his fraternity, and after law school he joined the Navy. One of Lieutenant Failla's early assignments overseas was processing sailors who were being discharged because they were homosexual. He volunteered to defend them.

Back in the States, Failla worked as an assistant district attorney in New York City. On one occasion he confronted a lawyer who was charging gay defendants exorbitant fees. She retorted: "You little s.o.b., I know you're a fairy and I'll get you." Failla's insides churned. "The terror was unbelievable," he says. "I dreamt of pushing her in front of a train." Instead, he began the painful push out of the closet. "I realized there was no way I could hide and have a normal life." Failla came out.

In the last decade, tens of thousands of gay men and women have rejected the safety in the shadows that was once the homosexual's only option. Clearly, it is a wrenching experience. Careers, relations with family and friends, even living arrangements are suddenly in jeopardy. For many, coming out is liberating. "No experience in life compares with being yourself," says Brian McNaught, a Roman Catholic who was so tormented by his closet existence that he attempted suicide. Still, countless others try to remain hidden. A 1982 marketing survey of urban gay males showed that while 54 percent considered themselves "publicly out," only one in five said his business associates knew he was gay. Four out of five still hid the truth from their families.

Gay life is fraught with such ironies. After decades of "research," no one can say for sure whether homosexuality is biologically or psychologically determined or—more important—whether it really matters. "We don't know how sexual preferences are developed," says sociologist Philip Kayal, "yet people are being condemned for something in them which shouldn't matter."

**Shattered Dreams:** But the condemnations and misunderstandings that accompany coming out are not a solitary burden. Parents with gay children struggle painfully with their own insecurities. Many experience a terrible sense of failure. And they must reconcile their love for their offspring with the realization that their own dreams—to give away a son or daughter in marriage, to become grandparents, to build up the family farm or business—have been shattered. To them, a child's coming out can destroy both hope and illusion. And their pain is just as real as that of their children.

Time and understanding often bring reconciliation. But that first confrontation can be disastrous. When Miami psychotherapist Melodie Moorehead told her family she was a lesbian, her mother asked if she were "the kind of person who would wait in elementary-school bushes." Dick Hanson's father, a practical Minnesota farmer, asked "if a doctor had verified" his homosexuality; his mother wanted to know where she went wrong. "Most people are afraid to tell their parents," says Richard Failla, now New York City's chief administrative-law judge. "They say they don't want to hurt them. The real reason is fear of rejection—that those who gave us life will turn against us. If you can't come out to those you love, how can you do it with strangers?"

The AIDS epidemic has brought all the fears and doubts rushing back. A married gay man struggling with his identity was told by his therapist: "Why leave a life-style for a death-style?" For many, the closet door is again swinging closed. Those outside are learning that coming out is a never-ending process.

Judge Richard Failla: 'No way I could hide'

Mario Ruiz—J. Miller



VINCENT COPPOLA with MARSHA ZABARSKY in Boston and bureau reports