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Faces like mine?

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In the short period of time that I have been here in Phoenix (just had my five month anniversary) I have noticed something peculiar that I think you may be able to help me out with. Possibly because I am a very social, visible, friendly, smiling, new face (cute face too) in town, I have magically gotten added to listservs, email groups, and planning meetings for a number of LGBT related groups. These groups or the group members “find out” about me and invite me to the table. We have amazing and productive conversations about the LGBT community in Maricopa County and in Arizona. We talk about collaborating with each other and representing the extremely diverse LGBT community that makes up the valley area, east, west, central, and even Apache Junction and Surprise. Sitting at the table, I am embraced, heard, questioned, challenged, supported, welcomed, and included. This is a fabulous opportunity for me to network, meet other leaders in the area, and to collaborate on projects, share resources and ideas. It is here that I begin to feel part of the fabric, woven into the community.

So what is the problem? Why do I need your help? Answer me this. How or better yet why do I get invited to the table when the diversity of the LGBT community is always talked about as “missing voices?” What I mean here is, literally, a group of mostly white faces and sometimes the same white faces, ask, “Where are the people of color?” Unlike any other place I have lived, there is statistical data collected that shows where the LGBT community lives and how these participating members identify by race, ethnicity, age, and class. We know if these folks have cell phones, credit cards, children, own homes or business in the area, etc. This is AMAZING to have a picture instead of painting one with limited voices. Yet, we say that voices are missing from the table were community initiatives are born, implemented, evaluated, assessed, monitored, and funded.

Frequently, and in every place I have lived and done LGBT work, “color” is missing at the table. I don’t mean flare; there is usually plenty of flare! I mean representation from non-white racial and ethnic groups; people that do not have white privilege. I think this is an important point, but not the question. The question should be for those at the table, “What am I doing to bring other voices to the table?” This is a much harder question to ask and to answer. As a white person, I don’t have to assess who my friends are or even whom I have connections with; I just get to float through. It is a lot of work to not float, and actually have the energy to evaluate who I make connections with, in my case mostly other white people, and why I make connections with them and not with others, mostly comfort and access. Hard to access people different from myself when I don’t take the time and energy to leave my comfort zone, right? Hey, you too! That’s another thing we have in common.

With that said, there is always the other side of the coin. It seems pretty commonplace to me, sitting at a table with mostly white faces, that there is a HUGE amount of diversity present that isn’t represented by race and ethnic identity. As in any organization, team, or group, there is the underlying truth that difference happens. That’s right, I said, diversity happens! What I mean here is that survey age, class, language, ability, profession, religion, sexual identity, gender expression, area of origin, etc. of the people at the table. If voices of color are not present, what about, trans/gender variant, bisexual/fluid, non-monogamous/polyamorous, HIV+, Ally, youth, elders, non-native English speakers, non-citizens, unemployed, veterans, women, people with disabilities, parents, grandparents, business owners, students, native-Phoenixians, single, married, vegetarians, Republicans, and people that had braces. I find in a number of the organizations that I work with, we spend a lot of time asking where the missing viewpoints are (and then speaking on the behalf of those not present) instead of looking at what is present and letting those perspectives speak for themselves. The intersections of oppression with privilege of any form create valuable difference and needs to be voiced if not celebrated. It is imperative that we at the table work together to name our many realms of influence and do our own work there. Otherwise, we at the table will just be waiting for the knock at the door from the missing voices to educate us as to why they need to be at the table – or more likely why they are arriving late.

Work with what is at the table. Work within yourself to impact your realms of influence while also intentionally leaving your comfort zones to self-educate. Work to provide a platform for all forms of representation. We all have a lot of work to do. It isn’t about you taking the first step or even me taking the risk. To be a “We” and to move the “Gay Agenda” forward, we must all link arms, believe in each other and all of our shared and different identities, and take steps of blind faith together welcoming others along the way.

Jessica Pettitt is available as a speaker, facilitator, trainer, writer, and teacher. Please visit www.jessicapettitt.com for more information. GPGC members receive a discount on all diversity training workshops.