

# BOYSTOWN

*Sex & Community in Chicago*

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*Photographs by Dylan Stuckey*

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## Gay Disneyland

David, a Black gay man in his midforties, stared at me across the table at Starbucks in Rogers Park. He looked a bit dumbfounded at my question.

"The bars have changed in the last ten years," he said. "More of a themed—" He stopped. "It's sort of like Disney World or Disneyland. Every bar has a theme to it."

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"Gays are great at gentrifying areas." Ginger, a multiracial Latino man in his midtwenties told me over tea. "That is, white gay men, sprinkle them anywhere. They're like fleas. They get in, they transform it. Soon you get flowering plants and brunches. Cultural events. And then all of a sudden, the yuppies move in. And then all of sudden it's not a gay area anymore. And I think Boystown is that place where—this is not even from me, there's a lot of queer folks who don't feel like it's their community anymore."

He looked at me dead in the eye.

"Boystown is wilting. And there are actually not—it's become so ridiculous that there's not a lot of the gays with money living there anymore. They're moving up. You've got to start moving up more. Because it's not—"

He paused to breathe, starting again more slowly. "It's a tourist trap, in a way. It's like a fun Disneyland park. That's what I like to think of it as. And I think that there's a lot of hope given into it with young people who are disenfranchised and who want a space to grow."

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I had talked with Ryan, a young activist, about those young people before.

"Why don't we start at the beginning," I asked. "What, in terms of Take Back Boystown, what do you know about that story?"

"To me, Take Back Boystown is part of something that was going on way before summer," he said.

"Great, let's start there."

"I—" he paused before even starting. "Like Boystown," he hesitated, as though to preface his critiques. "There's been a battle in Boystown over property. They are trying to make Boystown this sort of gay tourist—like Disneyland. Historically, the LGBT community has had strong, you know we've had, there's been periods where we've had a strong sense of self-community care. We've had Howard Brown. We've had the Broadway Youth Center. We have the Center on Halsted. The Take Back Boystown stabbing was a way to vilify those services. Because those services bring in people that are seen as undesirable by real estate developers and business owners. If they could eradicate them—eradicate those services from the neighborhood—that would be a gain for them."



Nearly everyone I talked to about Boystown would at some point, unprompted, compare Boystown to a theme park, a gay Disneyland. Assimilation transforms gayborhoods. Boystown has become a tourist attraction, a destination. Boystown is a place for people to visit and consume, rather than live. Boystown is like a section of Epcot in which you can eat gay foods, drink gay drinks, wear gay clothes, all of which are available for purchase in the gift shop.

"It's kind of everything that you would want if you were going to visit a gay neighborhood somewhere," Jackson, a Black gay man in his midtwenties, told me over coffee at Dollop Coffee in Uptown. "There are like fifteen clubs and everyone is looking adorable. People are roaming in groups, looking good. It's like, you know, a TV gay neighborhood."

Boystown is a fun night out drinking before you leave the fantasy of fabulousness to go home to the real world. Boystown isn't a place where you live, or a place where gay men to go to meet other men to date, to dance, to fuck. Boystown is a neighborhood to consume. To Adam, it's a mall.

"I was long out of high school before I realized that people actually lived in Schaumburg [a Chicago suburb] and Schaumburg wasn't just a place to put Woodfield mall," Adam said.

"You mean there is more than an IKEA there?" I said.

"Right? Boystown has that kind of mystique now. You come to the mall when you want to go shopping, and when it is time to go home, you get in your car and go home, but there's no need to live at the mall," Adam said. As a real estate agent, Adam knew quite a bit about the changes to the

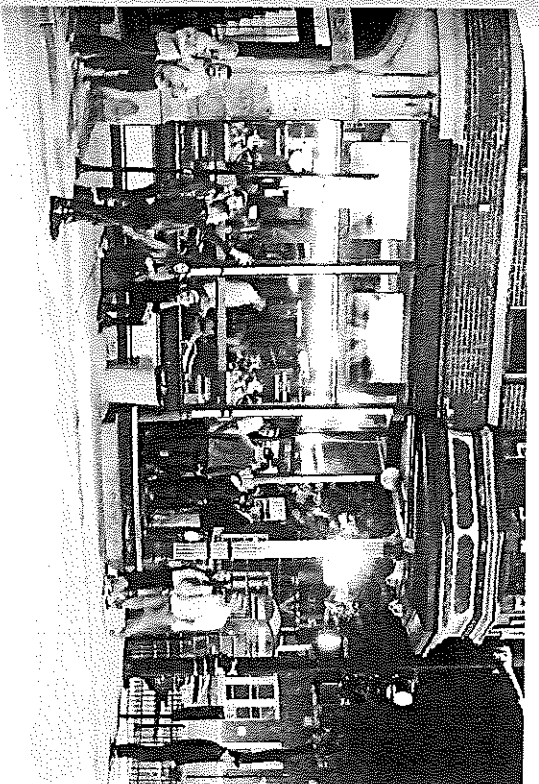


Figure 7.1. Outside Roscoe's bar

neighborhood over the last thirty years. He lived through them. Now, he made his living by knowing the right spot in the city to suggest. We were having coffee at New Modern Grill, a greasy-spoon diner at the corner of Halsted and Belmont.<sup>1</sup> Adam is a big man with a big personality. He filled the side of the booth opposite me, looming over me, telling me in a booming voice about the changes to the neighborhood.

New Modern Grill looked neither. It looked as though it had lived since the neighborhood was straight. The aged menu was displayed with black letters on a yellowed, lighted background, prices in red. The old cook shuffled behind the counter in a stained once-white apron. The waitress in gray sweatpants and a long blue T-shirt that fell to her knees wagged the coffee pot at us, but we waved her off.

"Yeah, I'm good. I'm feeling a little jittery. So, that's a good sign," he said. Then, with little additional prompting, Adam continued the story of Boystown. "Lakeview [the designated community zone containing Boystown], and I know this demographic from being a realtor, the gay and lesbian population continues to decline in Lakeview, but unlike in past situations where people have been priced out, people have been simply choosing to move away. Whether it's better prices, or more space, or they want to raise a family, which is something that they didn't necessarily have gay men and women actively and openly doing so much. There isn't really a reason to live in Lakeview for safety or comfort levels. There's no real reason to feel more safe in

Lakeview than, let's say, Lincoln Park, Edgewater, or any other middle- and upper-middle-class area in Chicago. There's no real reason to live in the gay ghetto."

What is the point of a gayborhood? Gayborhoods were once about safety. A place to escape to, away from the hateful eyes of the rest of society. A place for, primarily men, to live out an alternative life, unlike their fathers and brothers who got married and had children. For straight people, a gayborhood was also a corral, containing the aberrants and their sexual deviance from infecting (somewhat literally) the rest of society.

According to Adam's explanation, we don't need Boystown anymore. Accepted in straight society, gay men don't need to live in the ghetto. We've assimilated. Gay men can live anywhere, only returning to the gayborhood for fun. Amin Ghaziani, in *There Goes the Gayborhood*, argues that the flight away from gay neighborhoods represents a postgay era for American society. We've won, now we can live anywhere.

Not everyone wants to live in Disneyland, after all, as much as you may have wanted to as a child. As Adam says, there are many reasons queer people might not live in Boystown today. Many queer people do not live in Boystown for two interconnected reasons. First, while Adam's reality business may not work with them, Boystown is too expensive for many queer people. Second, its party atmosphere is not conducive to raising a family. Thus, Boystown occupies a youthful stage in the lives of some gay men—a theme park to party in before settling down, growing up, and moving to Andersonville, or what Ghaziani calls "Mandersonville."

"I would hate to live in Boystown." Raazia, an Indian American queer woman in her late thirties, told me.

"Why?" I asked, but I already knew the answer, from other participants.

"Sometimes I ask stupid questions just to get it on tape."

"Because it's neurotic," she said. "It's absolutely noisy, it's neurotic and it's mostly party people in their twenties, barfing in the alley behind there. And I'm beyond that. I never found that attractive. And I think that it's also very expensive. I think price is a huge factor. It's too expensive for people even to rent. So really most of the people who can afford it, right, either you live in a really tiny Podunk apartment there or you happen to be somebody who's relatively well off, goes to DePaul, whose parents can afford to subsidize your rent."

Now the only people who can afford to live in Boystown are DePaul students, upper-class gay men, and straight families. Boystown underwent what sociologist Japonica Brown-Saracino calls "late-stage gentrification."<sup>2</sup>

Gentrification, she argues, has two phases, making up the life cycle of a neighborhood. The first phase, early gentrification, is more recognizable, what many of us think of as gentrification, full stop. Gay men, artists, bohemians,

hipsters, and other white people with few economic resources but a lot of cultural capital move into an area predominately home to poor people of color. Gradually, the character of the neighborhood changes. Instead of being known as dangerous, it is hip. Prices rise. The neighborhood's previous residents can no longer afford to live there and move to a different cheaper, poorer area of the city. Over time, this results in areas of concentrated poverty, neighborhoods so Black or Latino that no white people will move into them.<sup>3</sup>

The gentrified neighborhood now isn't a "Black neighborhood" or a "Spanish neighborhood." White people live there. Without the dangerous specter of color haunting the neighborhood's reputation, more white people move to the area, except this time they have more money. These people begin to "improve" the neighborhood, turning it into a hotspot of activity. Eventually, prices have risen so much that the early adopters—the artists and bohemians and gay men—can no longer afford to live there. Privileged upper-class white people move into the area, and the cycle begins again with a new neighborhood. This less-discussed second wave of displacement is late-stage gentrification.

Boystown initially followed this pattern. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, queer people began coming north into the area known then as New Town, a Puerto Rican neighborhood, from areas in Lincoln Park and Old Town. Some groups that still exist in Boystown from this time make reference to the area as New Town, such as the LGBT writers group the New Town Writers, the Belmont Alcoholics Anonymous group known as New Town Alano Club, or the dry cleaners on Broadway and Cornelia, New Town Cleaners.

"The location of Boystown has changed. Traveled north," Adam informed me.

"Tell me a bit about that then." He didn't need a lot of coaxing for the history to spill out.

"A lot of gay migration, gentrification. Seriously, if you look at the nicer areas of Chicago that have gentrified over the years and become hotspots, you'll look at the gay migration of Chicago.

"When I first started making a foray out into the world, the gay area was moving from Hubbard and State area to what was then called New Town. And New Town was east and south Lakeview—Lakeview and Lincoln Park."

"So right on the northern edge of Lincoln Park?" I asked.

"Right, but on the Diversey side. But as that became more expensive..." He trailed off and switched directions. "Lincoln Park was initially down there, State and Hubbard—that area. A lot of us lived there but more so because we worked there. You know that was a little funky, nasty part of the Loop that nobody went to so it was safe to open gay bars where people would never look to find anyone because nobody went there."

That part of Chicago, known now as the River North area, still bears the mark of those times. Two holdouts, Downtown Bar and Second Story Bar survive because of the revitalization of the area, mostly as a result of business people going there after work and also travelers. Today, River North is one of the most expensive, touristy parts of Chicago.

That touristy spirit, though, also has been creeping north. Adam continued: "And this goes way before the eighties, into the sixties and seventies before, you know, I was old enough to go out or anything, but Lincoln Park was kind of a ghetto."

"Mm hm" I agreed. "Ain't a ghetto anymore."

"Right! There were really terrific houses and cheap stuff that nobody wanted to live near really. Gays moved in and started gentrifying. Other people followed and priced themselves out of the market and started to move north into what is now Boystown."

As people moved, Adam explained, the bars began to follow them.

"The bars south of Diversey closed as things got more expensive and tastes changed.\* New bars, things moved from Broadway, south of Diversey to north of Diversey. Late seventies and early eighties, you had Christopher Street. You had Little Jim's there. You had Men's Room."

As these bars began to materialize, Boystown's street culture began to take hold. While some richer gay men would jump into a cab as soon as they left the bars, many of the older gay men I talked with told me about how they would walk in groups between the gay bars that began popping up along Halsted Street because they felt unsafe in what they described as a homophobic area. These jannies developed into a street culture of hanging out on the street, walking up and down Halsted, that continues to this day among Black and Latino queer and trans youth, who congregate along the streets at night.

When the millennium turned, Boystown entered late-stage gentrification as straight people began moving into the area. George, a white gay man in his late thirties, told me that he moved back to Boystown, after being away since the early 2000s, "because it was a fun place to hang out and to fuck. But my husband and I were looking, and we're like 'Oh my god. It's become fucking Lincoln Park!' It's the demographic that I do not want. You know? It's not the neighborhood that it was ten years ago. It's less gay. It's less diverse. It's more of a tourists' stop."

George explained that, twenty years ago, a bar owner would have "all seventy-five of their staff lived in the neighborhood and would walk to work. And then today, one of seventy-five lives in the neighborhood, because the other seventy-four can't afford it because rent's gone up.

"I mean, you walk around the neighborhood and see the shops that are here now and see the people who are shopping here now. It's not what I

imagine a typically gay neighborhood to be. It's not the place for . . . the transients to come in. It's not the place for students to live. It's not the place for . . ." George paused to consider his words.

"Um, uh." He sputtered, unsure how to put it. "a more mixed atmosphere. You know?"

I did know. George was lamenting a gay neighborhood, perhaps a neighborhood that never truly existed, that was more mixed. A neighborhood that he would see out in the bars in the late nineties when he had last lived there. A neighborhood in which there were many different classes and colors of gay men pushed together against the rest of Chicago.

"I'm fine with straight people living in the neighborhood but not . . . but I also want like, a significant gay presence," George explained. "And there still is, but I feel like the gay presence, I don't know, but I feel like a lot of the gay presence leaves when the bars close. You know?"

"Mmm." I did know.

I lived out on the edge of Boystown at the time, at Irving Park and Pine Grove. Barely in the neighborhood, people would tell me. The apartment was the closest I could get on my graduate student salary, working remotely on a project at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Even then, I mostly slept on my couch. I rented out the bedroom on Airbnb to afford the rent.<sup>5</sup>

I would walk into Boystown proper each day to write, or do fieldwork, or conduct interviews, like this one with George at the Caribou Coffee on Halsted Street across from Hydrate and Little Jim's. The neighborhood had a completely different vibe during the day than at night, when people from all across Chicago would begin to trickle into the neighborhood to party at the bars.

During the day, George went on to explain, "it's a lot more baby carriages and strollers than it used to be. And it's not necessarily the gays with baby carriers. They all live in Andersonville or out in the burbs."

These are the straight families who now come to community meetings in Boystown to complain about the noise level from gay bars on the street. Parents telling the owner of Tulip's Toy Gallery that the sex toys displayed in the store window are inappropriate for children to see. Residents attempting to shut down the Broadway Youth Center or The Crib, a shelter for queer homeless youth. These are the straight families whose demand for amenities in the neighborhood is so high that a giant day-care facility began construction in 2014 on Halsted Street, in the space that a gay bar previously was going to be built.

The kind of gay man that used to live in Boystown—working class, service industry, students, young, white—now lives farther north in Uptown or Edgewater. Many gay men and queer people, especially white people, live in neighborhoods farther north. Ryan, a white, formerly homeless, queer

college student, told me that he lived just north in Uptown because Boystown had been taken over. "There's straight people who have moved into Boystown and like, you know upper-income, heterosexual families that want to raise families in Boystown now. It's getting to the point where even, like, single gay people can't live there anymore."

We were sitting in the student union of the local college he attended. It was quiet, both of us talking in hushed tones, such that the recorder had a hard time picking up parts of the conversation. At his last statement though, we both laughed, perhaps at the absurdity of a gay neighborhood where no gay people could live, causing the table of students nearby playing League of Legends on their computers to turn and stare at us.

"Yeah," I agreed, again more quietly.

"Like, now it's usually the people that go there don't even live in the neighborhood, they just go to the bars." Ryan said.

"Right, where would you say that people, do they just live anywhere else in the city?" I asked stupidly. I wanted to know if gay men truly did live anywhere now, or "Is there some other spot where people have been pushed to?"

"Wait, say that again?" Ryan said, confused by my artless and leading statement of the question.

I tried again. "So if they don't live, if young single gay men don't live in Boystown anymore, where have they been pushed to?"

"Oh yeah. Well there's been like a bunch of new places. I know Pilsen has a few gay clubs. Logan Square.<sup>6</sup> There's a lot of gay people who moved there. Um, a lot of [members of an organization I am involved with] live in Logan Square. Rent's cheaper. Um, Uptown. Of course, there's some issues of gentrification around these, too. People are constantly having to move and direct the city."

Ryan's explanation fits with Ghaziani's analysis of residential movement patterns. Even from a postgay perspective, gay men still follow a pattern. They don't spread evenly across this city. There are many places, many different neighborhoods where one could live. While white gay men might live in places other than the gayborhood, they still tended to cluster, like other white men in their income brackets, in neighborhoods like Uptown, Edgewater, Logan Square, and Lincoln Square.

However, if we expand our conception of queer people beyond the traditional white gay male residents of gayborhoods, it becomes evident that many people of color never lived in Boystown to begin with. Pauline, a Black lesbian in her late thirties, told me that when she was young, in the late 90s, she lived on the south side of Chicago. JJ and his friends, a primarily Latino group, all live on the west side of Chicago. These arrangements are typical Chicago, all live on the west side of Chicago. Boystown is no exception to that. The census

data, although notoriously unreliable for neighborhood demographics for Lakeview (the designated community zone containing Boystown), show that, since 1990, Lakeview has consistently been 75 percent white.

Yet, all of the queer people who have never lived in Boystown, or who newly can't afford to live in Boystown, or who can newly afford to live safely and openly in other parts of Chicago—all of these people still come to Boystown. Boystown is the gay destination. The place to party. Rather than focusing solely on neighborhood residence, we have to pay attention to a racial sociology of pleasure: where do people go when they consume?

Because, despite being the gay party destination, Boystown should have followed the pattern and moved north. Usually, a cycle of early and late-stage gentrification would mean that Boystown wouldn't be the gay neighborhood anymore. The bars would close down and relocate to the parts of the city that young, white, queer people now reside. Others would join the bars in Uptown and Edgewater, like Crew or Big Chicks: gay businesses following gay dollars.

Boystown didn't move north, though. The gayborhood remained in Lakeview for reasons that set the stage for its transformation into a gay Disneyland. First, the city of Chicago formally declared Boystown a "gay village." This was the first officially designated gay area in any city in the United States—surprisingly so, given the perhaps greater notoriety of the Castro, West Hollywood, and Chelsea.

This designation led the city to award a beautification grant to the neighborhood, along with several neighborhoods of color: Bronzeville, Chinatown, and Humboldt Park.<sup>7</sup> This beautification project created public art that visibly marked the area. In Boystown, large rainbow pylons—what many call Boystown's golden phalluses—were erected. Today, these pylons hold plaques for the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame, honoring famous LGBTQ people throughout history. They are literal stakes in the ground, marking this as the gay area of Chicago.

Second, cementing the area as the destination and official gay area for LGBTQ people in Chicago, the Center on Halsted opened in 2007. This multimillion-dollar community center offers social services and community events for Chicago's queer community. Similarly, in 2013, Howard Brown Health Center, an LGBTQ health nonprofit, opened their second clinic in Boystown. Despite continued troubles, the Broadway Youth Center remains in Boystown as well, providing drop-in services to queer youth, many of whom are homeless. That these services were put in this neighborhood—rather than opening smaller centers situated throughout the city as was once proposed when the Center on Halsted opened—marks Boystown as the gay destination of Chicago.<sup>8</sup>



As George said, “We just happen to have golden penises and the Center on Halsted that will hopefully help it [Boystown] last.”

But there is one more reason: economics. The major bars and entertainment conglomerates on the street own the buildings in which they reside. Formerly, moving a gay bar was a matter of letting the lease run out in response to a rent hike. The new bar, perhaps with a different name, would open up in the cheaper gay area. Today, the business owners in the area have to figure out a way to protect their investments.

Those that do not own their buildings are far more transient, opening and closing regularly. Circuit, the Black and Latino club across from the Center on Halsted, for instance, has closed several times for brief stints over rent arguments with the building’s owners. Cocktail similarly closed several times over rent arguments with its building’s owners, who also owned competitor Roscoe’s across the street. Eventually, Cocktail permanently shuttered, replaced with a more upscale bar called Progress. Sidetrack, Roscoe’s, and Minibar all own the spaces in which their bars are located. Owning a location means they are rooted in a way that discourages moving.

Like others, when Austin and I moved in together in January 2013, we felt that we couldn’t live in Boystown anymore on our student salaries. Sleeping on the couch and renting out my bedroom on Airbnb wasn’t going to cut it anymore. We didn’t go far though, only moving three blocks from where I used to live, across Irving Park into Buena Park, a subset of the Uptown community zone.

Did we move to Uptown because we felt that we were integrated into straight society? We may not have felt forced to live in the gayhood, but that didn’t mean that we stopped venturing to Boystown to shop, eat, and drink. People go there from all over Chicago to hang out. JJ and his friends as I’ve said, live out west. Yet, they still pile in the car several times a week to come out to Boystown for an afterwork drink (or five). Frank’s white queers live in Edgewater, Rogers Park, Logan Square, and Lincoln Square, but I still see them around Boystown on a regular basis, having coffee in Caribou, using the services at the Center on Halsted, or going to an event at Sidetrack.

Is that assimilation?

Assimilation is the acceptance of a minority group, the process of blending them into the mainstream. One interpretation of the residential movement away from Boystown is that American society is becoming postgay, moving beyond gay identity because of the rising acceptance of gay people. Scholars like Ghaziani rightly argue that we should look at the factors that produced gay neighborhoods initially. We should not assume that they will always exist essentially in the same form.<sup>9</sup>

Gayhoods, as mentioned earlier, initially formed in the aftermath of

World War II. Port cities, such as New York City and San Francisco, experienced an influx of men separated from their families and the forms of social control exerted by them.<sup>10</sup> New economic forces also allowed these men to live without wives, because they could get their household labor through the marketplace instead of requiring a family homestead to support the family as an economic unit. These freedoms were specific to gay men. Lesbians and queer women were generally not similarly free to leave home or have the economic capital to support themselves without men, with Andersonville being the notable exception concerning formation of a community of queer women—and worthy of its own book.<sup>11</sup> These new realities meant that gay men could come together into gayhoods.

However, there was still a general antipathy against gay men. Gay men could not live anywhere they wanted in cities. Gay bars were routinely raided by police. Those bars that could stay open did so under the protection/extortion of organized crime. The “gay ghetto” was the dirty forgotten place, as Adam the real estate agent chronicled earlier, where no one went and thus gay men could be marginally more open.

The gayhood was born of these two forces: newfound freedom to live separately from a heterosexual family unit and a hatred forcing gay men to gather spatially. This separate space created separate cultures from straight society, queer cultures with different sexual values than the heterosexual majority, which relied on the subservience of women to maintain the home. The second of these forces—bias against gays—is breaking down. Assimilation punctured the membrane of the gayhood, sending gay men to live in other parts of the city.

In my conversation with George, he called the mixed blessing of assimilation the “classic dilemma,” as in the question posed by Joshua Gamson in his famous essay, “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct?”<sup>12</sup>

“It’s the challenge with normalization of queer lifestyle,” George said. “Well, the gay partnered lifestyle. I don’t know if you can say queer lifestyle is still normalized, but um, as it becomes easier to be out in other places, there’s less need for the gay . . .” He trailed off again, struggling with how to express a complex connection.

He began again: “It’s the classic dilemma. It’s, like, we want equality. We want acceptance. We want affirmation. But at the same time, as someone who is very involved in the community, and wants affinity, and is working at [community organization], it’s disheartening to see. We’re losing part of that because there’s not as much to fight for. There’s that complacency”—the postgay era, according to some scholars.<sup>13</sup>

If you can live anywhere, what meaning does the gayhood have? Boystown may not be the residential neighborhood that it once was, but it remains the consumption capital of Chicago for gay people. More gay people

may live in Edgewater than in Boystown, but the Pride Parade still happens in Boystown.

I argue that, instead of hastening the gayborhood's disappearance, assimilation changed Boystown and our relationship with it. Boystown's continued popularity as a gay Disneyland is evidence not that we are beyond gay identity but that gayborhoods remain extremely relevant. The gay men who frequent such neighborhoods, though, while still identifying as gay, are different from earlier populations there. Acceptance brought great things to gay people, but it cost something, too. Boystown is so accepted that everyone now comes to Boystown to have a good time, for better and for worse.

# 8

## Becoming Gay

No one is born gay.

Whether desire is biological, or social, or a bit of both, we learn how to be gay: What do gay people like? What do gay people do? (Even how to have gay sex isn't apparent on first glance.) In *How to Be Gay*, noted sexuality scholar David Halperin remarks, "Gayness is not a state or condition. It's a mode of perception, an attitude, an ethos: in short, it is a practice."<sup>1</sup> More than a culture or identity, gayness is a habitus.

Barbara Streisand, Madonna, Lady Gaga. Diva worship isn't genetic. You weren't born this way, baby. It's an acquired taste. So, how do we learn to be gay? How do we learn this practice?

For many queer people in the Midwest, the answer lies in Chicago.

When I first came to Boystown in March 2011, I was about to celebrate my decade gay-iversary.<sup>2</sup> Through movies, friends, bars, and pornography, I had already learned how to be gay.

Boystown was something altogether different. Like many of the queer people that I have talked to, the sights and sounds of an entire neighborhood in which I was the majority were intoxicating. In Austin, Texas, where I had lived before, as long as you stayed within the city block surrounding Olean Harry's on Fourth Street, you felt safe. In Madison, Wisconsin, I rarely strayed from the isthmus, near the city's university. In many cities, that aura of safety extends no farther than the parking lot surrounding the tavern where everyone queer in the surrounding counties is forced under one roof.

That's if you're lucky. Many places have so much less.

From that first exhilarating visit to Boystown, I knew I wanted to move there. I had plenty of gay friends, but I wanted to move to a gay place. I wanted to live where I would see gay people, do gay things, and feel a kinship with the space.