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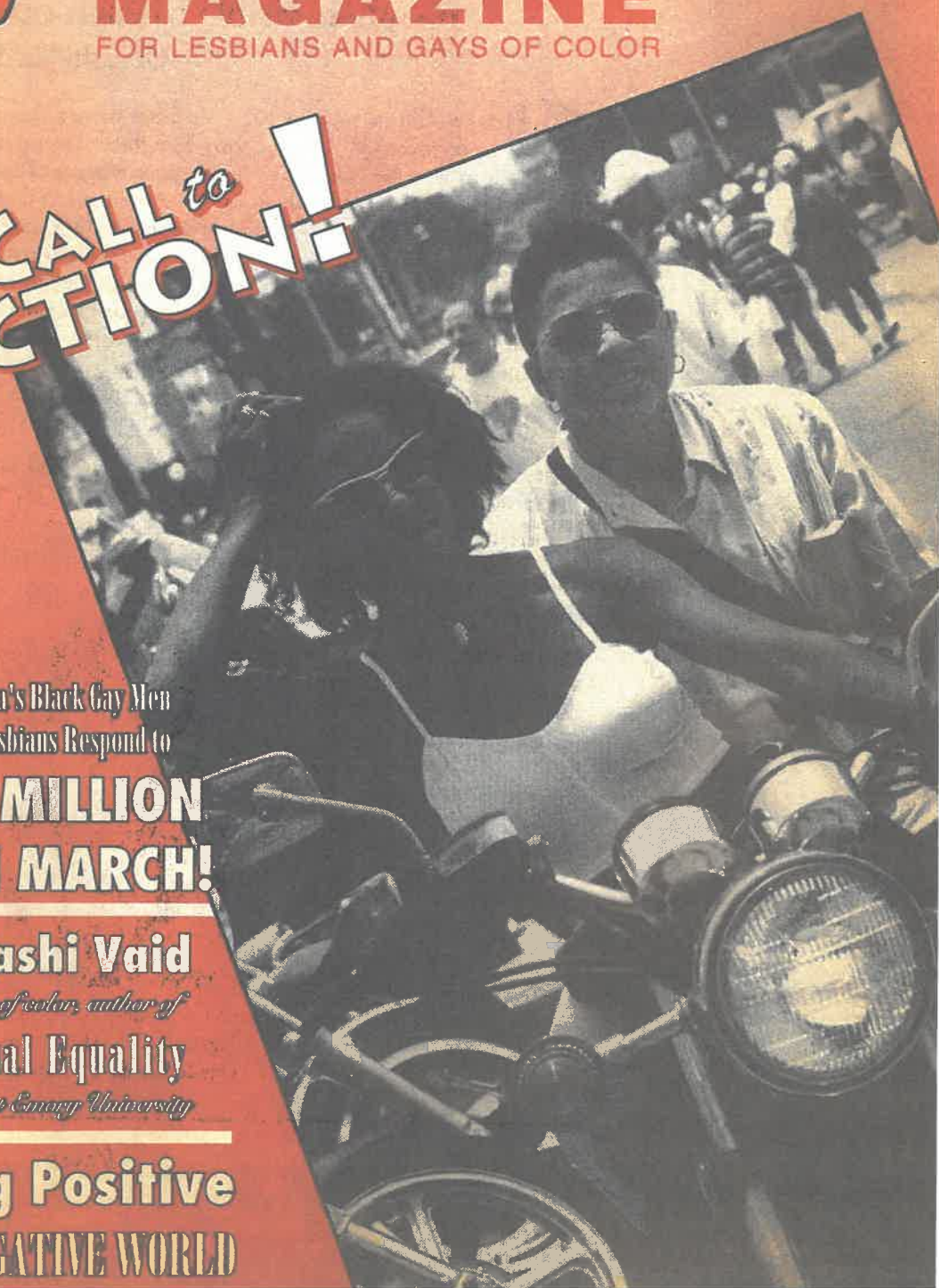
A CALL ^{to}
ACTION!

America's Black Gay Men
and Lesbians Respond to
**THE MILLION
MAN MARCH!**

Urvashi Vaid

*lesbian of color, author of
Virtual Equality
speaks at Emory University*

**Being Positive
IN A NEGATIVE WORLD**



Urvashi Vaid: Virtual Equality

by Eve Wernicky

"No movement can be built by a people invisible to each other and society."

—Urvashi Vaid

Channel-surf the tube on any given night and you're likely to see a gay character on television or an informative exposé on gay life. President Bill Clinton has recently made U.S. history by appointing the first White House staffer (Marsha Scott) to the post of gay and lesbian liaison.

This decade, coined the "Gay '90's," has catapulted the ascendancy of lesbians and gays into mainstream society in unparalleled fashion. But is the blinding visibility of homosexuals translating into clout-wielding power and true liberation?

That question is the premise of gay-rights advocate Urvashi Vaid's upcoming book, "Virtual Equality." The 36 year old was the first woman of color to become executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the oldest national gay civil rights organization. She resigned in 1993 to write the book; an honest, pragmatic, no-holds barred chronicle of the U.S. gay civil rights movement. It also examines the lack of equality from within the gay struggle.

Vaid has written that there have been three cultural victories in the gay movement: The move by the American Psychiatric Association in 1973 to remove homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses, the shattering of the heterosexual culture's denial of homosexuality by "coming out," and the gain of political access. But there is still work to do.

Named a "firebrand activist" by *Vanity Fair* and a gay "power broker" by *Newsweek*, Vaid will be speaking at Emory University



Urvashi Vaid, author of *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay & Lesbian Liberation*.

at 8 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 11 as part of her book tour.

When *Time* magazine named her as one of 50 promising leaders under the age of 40 in 1994 — alongside the ranks of Oprah Winfrey and John F. Kennedy Jr. — she recounted her family's move from India to Potsdam, New York in 1966.

"We stood out like sore thumbs. Kids used to ask, 'Did you grow up in a teepee?'" The activist in her began brewing in high school, when she became involved in the women's movement. By the time she finished law school at Northeastern University in the early 80's, she was already involved in the gay rights movement.

After a lawyer stint in Boston, she became the public information officer for NGLTF and by 1989 had been selected as executive director, prevailing over a field of more than 70 candidates.

Even though she won and made history, she was not immune to jabs from within a movement dominated by white gay males.

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P E R S P E C T I V E S

In "Virtual Equality" she reveals her undaunting fortitude in her struggle to move the gay agenda forward despite inner racism and sexism.

"My revenge was to be really good," said Vaid.

One of the earliest incidents involved a NGLTF perplexed patron, who upon Vaid's selection, approached a NGLTF board member and asked why the organization had chosen someone "who's practically a nigger."

"During the next three and a half years, incidents of racial and gender intolerance piled up like grime from exhaust, a by-product of working in a gay and lesbian movement that labors under the same racial prejudice, gender binarism, and heterosexism that weigh down the broader society," Vaid wrote.

VENUS: Stepping down from NGLTF must have been a difficult decision, why did you feel the need to write the book?

VAID: "I had been working in the gay and lesbian movement for 15 years and wanted to share my experiences and occurrences. There are a lot of people who hear about the movement but they don't know what they're talking about. Usually these types of books are written by academicians and journalists and not the activists who live these experiences because activists don't have time to write. There are very few historical books about the movement—or at least the current

movement. I felt I had something unique to offer. The book exposes the myth that gays have achieved anything close to real equality."

VENUS: The book pulls no punches on the mistakes of the movement, how do you think people will react to it?

VAID: "I suspect some people will think it's a bit harsh. I hope people will appreciate that honesty is helpful to all of us. The movement is in a critical place. We need to be more organized. We need political power, not simply access to power. The movement still consists of a small group who have access. I live in a gay resort town (Provincetown, Mass.) where people can come and be gay and really experience what it would be like to live in a free society."

VENUS: You once said in an article that you thought it would take a lifetime for the gay civil rights agenda to win, you truly do not think it will happen in your lifetime?

VAID: "Writing this book made me appreciate the history of this movement. I think it's going to take a long time. Only nine states have gay rights laws. I don't say this as a discouraging thing. Part of what makes me hopeful is that when we lose a battle today, we will try again tomorrow."

VENUS: You analyze a recent lost battle, the ban on gays in

the military. In the midst of that cataclysm, what went wrong?

VAID: Just as President Clinton lost credibility with the gay community, I believe we too lost credibility with the White House. I think it was as much our fault as it was his or the government's because we failed to organize a letter-writing campaign, while the radical right wrote thousands and thousands of letters of protest. Our grassroots campaign has a roof and a floor, but no walls."

VENUS: With that in mind, the presidential election monster is beginning to hover over us; how does it look for gays in '96? President Clinton has lost some support because of the military issue and a lacking AIDS agenda.

VAID: "We're in a tough spot and even though Clinton may take us for granted, we have to look out for our best interests. Certainly the conservatives and right-wing are not going to do that. I think gays will once again back Clinton. Colin Powell supported the ban on the military, he is no friend of ours. However, I'm not sure if he will run for president. I think he is just trying to sell books and is pulling off a brilliant PR scam."

VENUS: I'm sensing some publishing envy, is there anything you'd like to disclose?

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P E R S P E C T I V E S

VAID: "All right. You got me! This is an exclusive. I, too, am running for president."

VENUS: That's not entirely an off-base probe, especially after the Time article. Do you have plans to enter the political arena someday?

VAID: "I don't think so. I work better as an advocate because I can't compromise. I'm sorry, but I don't know how to be a bureaucrat. But I seriously think there should be a gay candidate in the '96 election to do what Pat Robertson did. We can learn a lot from the radical right. He was able to identify a national network of supporters. The '96 election will be crucial. Look at what happened in the 1994 congressional election. Only 39% voted and there was a balance of power based on a handful of votes. Imagine what an impact we could have if we registered 1.5 million gay people for '96!"

VENUS: Other than the AIDS issue, there seems to be a lack of urgency in the gay rights movement.

VAID: "We are declined into complacency and that leads to virtual progress, a kind of computer-simulated equality. I could be regarded as a moral and ethical human being, but that is not where we are right now in society. The black civil rights movement achieved so much change, but racism still persists. Our movement has moved to a

"yes, but" argument. Complacency is short-sighted and self-destructive. Every one of our laws can be wiped away by referendum."

VENUS: Is there a need for a more unified leadership? Maybe we could learn something from the way the radical right has catechized their movement.

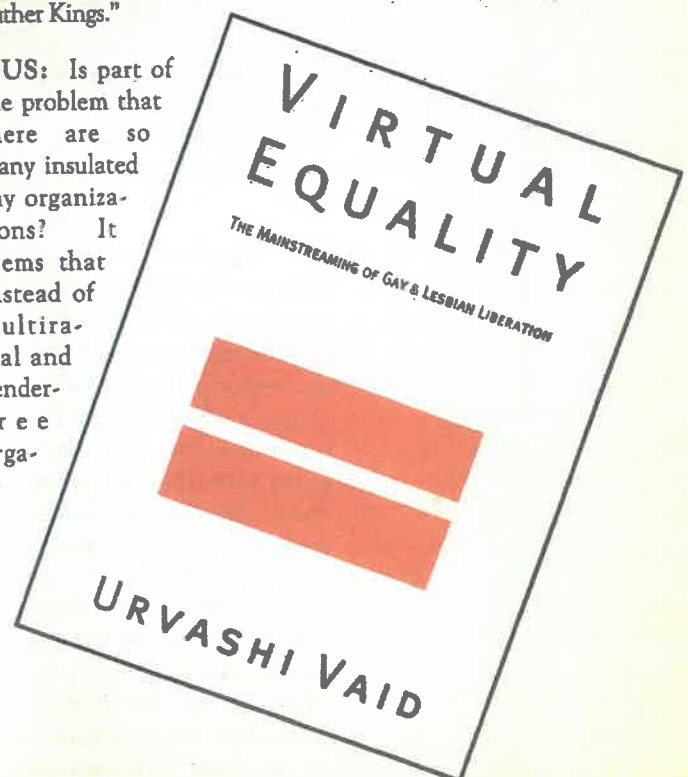
VAID: "I don't think we are training people. The right wing is training people on how to run for office, even in local campaigns. We are training on the nuts-and-bolts of how to make a mailing list. That's got to change for us. Corporations do this all the time. We need to invest in leadership because I think we have 500 Martin Luther Kings."

VENUS: Is part of the problem that there are so many insulated gay organizations? It seems that instead of multiracial and gender-free orga-

nizations, we keep on inventing more single-race or single-gender groups. You intellectualize the self-destruction of Queer Nation, whose motto was "I Hate Straights" as an example of this type of polarization.

VAID: "We have created more identity-based organizations and that has been good and important because it makes every segment of our society visible. The limitation is that these organizations separate us and are limiting. I want a common movement that works. My vision is progressive. For example, women's equality is intimately connected with the gay movement."

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P E R S P E C T I V E S

VENUS: Sounds like Utopia.

VAID: "It's reality."

VENUS: In the book you argue that the AIDS crisis galvanized gays to choose "legitimation" or mainstreaming, the concept that gays and straights are the same and are vulnerable to this disease, instead of "liberation," which would expose our differences and change society. The obvious thinking is that legitimation would save lives more quickly.

VAID: "I think we had to do it but when we 'degayed' AIDS, it was a mistake. We had a chance to reach thousands of people, but we divorced poli-

tics from social services. We did not make a connection between AIDS and homophobia. We could have made a cultural transformation. But we did not change people's attitudes. We are seen as second-class immoral beings."

VENUS: So what do we do now?

Vaid has written a to do list:

1. Community organizing and winning political battles
2. Public Education strategy and business campaigns attacking hate
3. Leadership Development for activists on gay history
4. Think Tanks to propose public policy

5. Political vision of the power of culture and art to change consciousness

VENUS: And what's next for you?

VAID: "Two things: I want to help build our state and local power and infrastructure. I also want to bring together a progressive movement to end sexism and racial prejudice within our movement. I want to open a Center for Progressive Renewal (CPR), a kind of think tank, start-from-scratch center that would offer fresh ideas."

Eve Wernicky is a freelance writer and former journalist for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

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