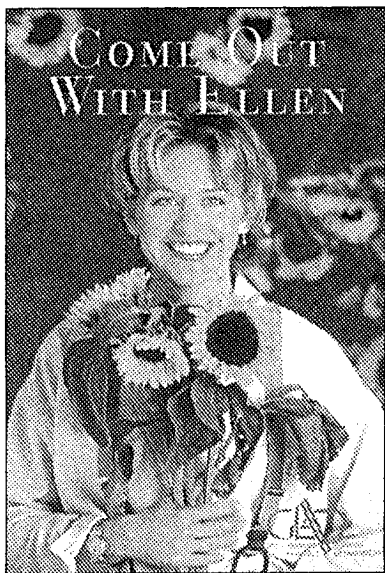


The Living Arts

The New York Times

She's Gay, And a Lot Of Fans Are Happy



Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

Parties will greet the "Ellen" coming-out show on April 30.

By ERIKA MILVY

One morning last month, just before a filming of the ABC television show "Ellen," Tracy Newman, a consulting producer, asked the show's star, Ellen DeGeneres, to autograph her copy of the script. It was the script for the heavily anticipated and highly publicized April 30 episode in which the sitcom's lead character, Ellen Morgan, announces she is a lesbian.

"Can you believe what a big deal this is?" Ms. DeGeneres scrawled on the script. "Maybe one day, it won't be."

But that day has yet to arrive.

Although many have been talking about the episode for months, and Ms. DeGeneres herself announced her homosexuality on the cover of this week's Time magazine, the fact that a prime-time network series is getting its first lesbian lead character is resonating deeply with lesbians and gay men across the country.

Parties are being planned in clubs and living rooms so that friends can watch the episode together; others say they are using the character's openness to make coming-out decisions of their own.

"Seeing her out in the world also means that I can finally have an opportunity on network TV to see someone who vaguely reflects my life," Luci Englert, who lives in the Midwest, wrote to an E-mail discussion group in cyberspace, where much of this groundswell of emotion is surfacing. "I can feel knots inside me loosening, even in anticipation. I know that for 30 minutes each week I can 'go to a place where everybody knows my name.'"

Another woman, who did not attach her name, sent this E-mail message to other "Ellen" enthusiasts on-

Celebrating when a sitcom character finally declares herself a lesbian.

line: "Ellen's decision to come out has indeed spurred me to tiptoe out of my own closet. I plan to tell my parents this weekend. I didn't want to wait anymore, but needed a push."

Ann Northrop, a co-host of the Gay Cable Network's "Gay USA," who is holding a party at her home at London Terrace, in Chelsea, said: "No one could have conceived of this as a possibility two or three years ago. If you had said to any gay person that there would be an 'out' gay character leading a prime-time sitcom, everyone would have looked at you like you had three heads."

Gay groups are also organizing or sponsoring events, even sending out party kits to get celebrations rolling. GLAAD, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, a national advocacy group, along with Absolut vodka, will be holding "Come Out With Ellen" benefit parties on the night of the broadcast in New York, Washington, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego and Kansas City, Mo. Events will include raffles for memorabilia from the "Ellen" set.

"I just hope we can hear the dialogue over the applause," said Chip Duckett, 34, the promoter of the New York event, at the Irving Plaza. "If you speak to some older gay people, some people do get teary eyed at the fact that this is actually happening."

The Human Rights Campaign, a

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It's No Longer A Secret, But Still Exciting



Paul O. Boisvert for The New York Times

Left, friends in rural Vermont gather to watch "Ellen." Below, "coming-out party" graphic on the Internet.

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The Human Rights Campaign, a gay political lobbying group based in Washington, says it has already received 1,300 requests for its party kit, from prospective hosts across the country and as far away as Finland and Japan. The kit includes invitations, posters and an "Ellen" trivia game, along with sign-up forms for the organization.

Quieter events are also being planned, in places far removed from the the epicenters of show-business hype. In Putney, Vt., for example, a group of lesbians already gather weekly to watch the show. "It's a double whammy," Angie Dodd said about the parallel coming-out stories of the real and fictional Ellens. Ms. Dodd, who does not own a television set, will drive, as she has every week, 25 minutes on a dirt road, to reach a set and join her friends for the big night.

The Putney party's host, Beth Margolin, gets only one channel due to rural reception. Fortunately for her, it is ABC. Ms. Dodd said she feels the episode will "expose the broader population to the fact, that lesbians exist."

"As with any other marginalized population, you don't realize how much you crave seeing yourself reflected in the popular media," she added.

Neil Postman, the chairman of the department of culture and communication at New York University and the author of several books on the media and their effect on culture, said, "Since television is the command center of American public life, television gives legitimacy to ideas."

Television, he added, "is the way ideas get distributed through the culture."

For the series, which stars Ms. DeGeneres as a sweetly befuddled bookstore employee, a latte-lapping Lucille Ball type, the ratings boost that is sure to follow from all this exposure comes at an opportune time. The show was rated No. 5 in its first season, 1993-94; it has now dropped to No. 36. Yet, even this spin reveals a certain irony: time was when such a disclosure could kill a show, not give it the possibility of a new lease on life.

The April 30 episode — not coincidentally, scheduled for the Nielsen ratings sweeps week — will be a special hourlong show and will be shown at 9 P.M. rather than its usual half-hour slot at 9:30. There will be guest appearances by Melissa Etheridge, Oprah Winfrey, K. D. Lang, Laura Dern, Demi Moore, Dwight Yoakam and Billy Bob Thornton. Ms. Dern will play Ellen's love interest, and Ms. Winfrey, as Ellen's therapist, will be there to symbolically hold America's hand through the experience.

Predictably, "Ellen" has been a hot topic on the

A milestone for gay people and for television.

Internet for months. Many gay men and lesbians, especially those who do not live in big cities, are finding a community of like-minded "Ellen" enthusiasts in chat rooms. There have been numerous Web sites established to talk about the big day as well as sites where supporters can send an E-mail message to the network and sponsors, or download party planners or even "Ellen" wallpaper for the computer screen.

But the Web buzz has not all been positive. Some have said they will stop watching the show. Some vow to boycott the sponsors. At one point, pro-"Ellen" bulletin boards were so flooded with a well-organized campaign of hostile "flames" that America Online shut down its current bulletin board and replaced it with one that had stricter guidelines.



In Sonoma County, Calif., Ellen Elias and her partner, Robyn Bramhall, will be holding an "Ellen" viewing party at a local pizza place. Ms. Elias said that many in the lesbian community knew all along that Ellen Morgan was gay, even if the character did not.

"We knew that most Americans didn't get it," Ms. Elias said. "They saw a pleasant, insecure, very funny woman. When she dated men, as she did early in the series, it didn't work, and we knew why, of course."

Indeed, two years ago, Joyce Millman, then the television critic of The San Francisco Examiner, referred to "Ellen" as "the sitcom that dare not speak its name."

While Ellen is, in fact, now speaking up, it's doubtful that she will become a spokeswoman. "I do recognize her lack of political consciousness as a possible problem," said Ms. Northrop of the Gay Cable Network. Still, a weekly glimpse at a fictitious lesbian life may prove to be even more effective as an agent of social change than the birth of another advocate.

In many households, television plays the role of a cherished family member or trusted friend.

And Ms. Newman, a consulting producer of "Ellen," remembers how, during the writing of the coming-out episode, one of the gay writers said that sometimes all it takes is a gay friend to teach someone to accept homosexuality.

"In that respect, it's wonderful that it's the medium of television," she said. "It is wonderful that it's in your home every Wednesday and that the television audience has slowly grown to love and care about this person, and then they find out this, and so what? I still love her."