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“Don’t Cross Momma!” A Visual Representation of LGBTQI Woman Leader Jan Lancaster

Lucy Bullock
November 1st, 2016

Introduction

Jan Lancaster, fondly known as “Momma” by her patrons, is the proud owner of The Bistro, President of the Central Illinois Pride Health Center, member of the Human Relations Commission, and Vice President of the Downtown Bloomington Association. Jan is a passionate, active, dedicated, and loving leader of Bloomington-Normal’s Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Questioning and Intersex community. She has served on many boards and associations throughout the years, including being the main player to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in Bloomington Normal. Her leadership role as owner of downtown’s alternative bar The Bistro, however, serves as her central position within the community. Jan has owned the bar since 1993, and considers it a home open to everyone, not just LGBTQI members. It should be noted that The Bistro is commonly termed a “gay bar,” but Jan prefers the term “alternative,” suggesting that everyone is welcomed, not only gay community members (Ethnographic Interview of Jan Lancaster, October 14th).

From my first meeting with Jan, it was evident why she is referred to as “Momma.” She treats the bar as her home and her patrons as if they were her children, but is also unyielding in her dedication to protect her children, as portrayed in the community motto “*don’t cross Momma!*” (Ethnographic interview of Jan Lancaster, October 14th). During the time I spent with Jan, there were themes and issues she clearly emphasized as key to her role as a leader. Her success as a protector and also defender of the LGBTQI community has developed, in her opinion, because of the value she places on listening to the stories of the LGBTQI in need, the constant self-education of LGBTQI issues and sensitivities, and creating a safe, home-like environment for her community. Jan also stresses the need for more diversity and education of the LGBTQI culture in the larger Bloomington-Normal community.

Assumptions/Early Hypotheses

I consider myself an ally of the LGBTQI community and am honored to be given the opportunity to work with such an inspiring leader. I find those who identify as LGBTQI, their leaders, and their communities to be extremely welcoming, entertaining, and open-minded. I was enthusiastic to meet and begin collaborating with Jan, assuming that as an owner of an alternative bar, she would fit my assumptions of an LGBTQI leader. I had also heard from many students on campus that The Bistro is an extremely lively and joyous bar. Knowing that Jan is referred to as “Momma,” I assumed that she would be motherly towards her patrons.

Through my reading of secondary sources, I came to have some crucial assumptions about Jan and the LGBTQI community. The authors who researched female leaders focus on the stereotypes and discriminations these women face in their field. The research on LGBTQI leaders examines the use of safe spaces, the crucial understanding of intersectionality, and the knowledge of the personal stories of LGBTQI needed by leaders in order to succeed in that role. The information I gained from the readings helped me form the majority of my interview questions.

Miller and Vaccaro (2016) highlight the importance of LGBTQI leaders being authentic and culturally competent. They also discuss the creation of safe spaces where members can explore their identity journeys. Hernandez & Fraynd (2014) focus on the LGBTQI community specifically, suggesting that leaders should be given sufficient training on how to create inclusive and safe communities for LGBTQI and stress the importance of fighting heteronormativity. As far as gender biases, Cook & Glass (2016) suggest that female leaders are more likely to adopt lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender friendly policies than their male counterparts are. Brescoll (2016) also explains that female leaders have to put a great deal more attention into the degree of emotion they display, as females are stereotyped as being overly emotional, which in turn affects their decision-making. Lastly, Renn and Bilodeau (2005) reveal the significance of having a mentor to model after. A mentor can inspire the leader to follow the path of leadership and serve as motivation to persevere when they feel like giving up.

Ethnographic Methods:

My ethnographic research was comprised of participant-observation and a formal interview. Most importantly, Jan and I collected information through visual ethnographic methods. We conducted an in-depth, collaborative research project through the use of images and photo-feedback. I presented my own auto-ethnographic photo essay and showed Jan what I had created. I was able to explain through images what we would produce better than I could through words.

I then asked Jan to show me images that are important to her or are representative of her as a leader. One of the images, for example, is of her and her mother. It is through this image that she was able to explain that she is very close to her mother and she inspired Jan to be the strong, independent, and compassionate woman she is. Jan's explanation of the images and why they were important to her allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of her self-perceptions, values, and aspirations.

Once we began taking photos together and Jan chose her favorites, we exposed her feelings that could not have been revealed through traditional interviewing or observation. Jan's "YWCA 2007 Women of Distinction Award," for example, displayed in Figure 1, is something that she is not only very proud of, but that also explains her leadership success. She was presented this award for her dedication to making Downtown Bloomington more community-orientated. Community members tell Jan their concerns about downtown and she strives to find answers. While Jan works very closely with the real Mayor of Bloomington, she is also called "*The Mayor of Main Street*" for her dedication to the city (Ethnographic Interview of Jan Lancaster, October 14th). Jan also notes that she was honored because of her commitment to making Bloomington more diverse.



Figure 1: Jan's success as a leader was honored in 2007 with the YWCA Women of Distinction Award, which she received for her outstanding commitment to educating and diversifying Downtown Bloomington.

After an initial meeting at which we reviewed guidelines for the project, I conducted participant-observation at The Bistro's "Thursday Night Bingo" from 9 PM to 10PM on October 13th. I observed how extremely welcoming she is to everyone that walks through the door of her bar. She creates a brilliantly fun and relaxed atmosphere, from her colorful and cheeky language to her caring and motherly attitude. I observed how she interacts with each and every patron, most of whom lovingly referring to her as "Momma."

The next stage of our collaborative process was a formal hour long interview at The Bistro on October 14th. Jan admitted her struggles with earning respect in Downtown Bloomington as the owner of the only alternative bar in town. She personally sees how many young adults are struggling with their identities as LGBTQI and this greatly affects her. Jan therefore wants the Bistro to be a “home” for struggling adults who feel they do not have a home of their own. She is very proud of what she has accomplished as the inclusive and warm Momma she has become, but her success did not come without confrontation or violence. Jan described a time in 1994, about a year after she had opened the bar, when a group of young men entered the bar with weapons and physically attacked the patrons of the bar, solely based on the assumption that they were gay.

Jan explained that she is a very compassionate person and that events such as this incident and the Orlando shooting affect her greatly. This relates to the data presented by Cook & Glass (2016) and Brescoll (2016) on female leaders that suggest they are overemotional. Jan tries not to be overly emotional, but still believes that strong leaders are emotional. Jan expresses that she does not feel she is overpowered by males in her role, that in fact the city council is made up of strong females and Bloomington is a “*great city of women*” (Ethnographic Interview of Jan Lancaster, October 14th).

Jan, just as Renn and Bilodeau (2005) suggest, cites a mentor as a key factor in her path to leadership. As shown in Figure 2, Jan names her mother as her mentor. Jan’s mother was a single parent and social worker who taught Jan how important it is to be compassionate, which she exclaims “*makes the world go around.*” (Ethnographic Interview of Jan Lancaster, October 14th). Though she references her mother as her main mentor, her grandmother too was a very strong independent woman, forming a long line of strong women.

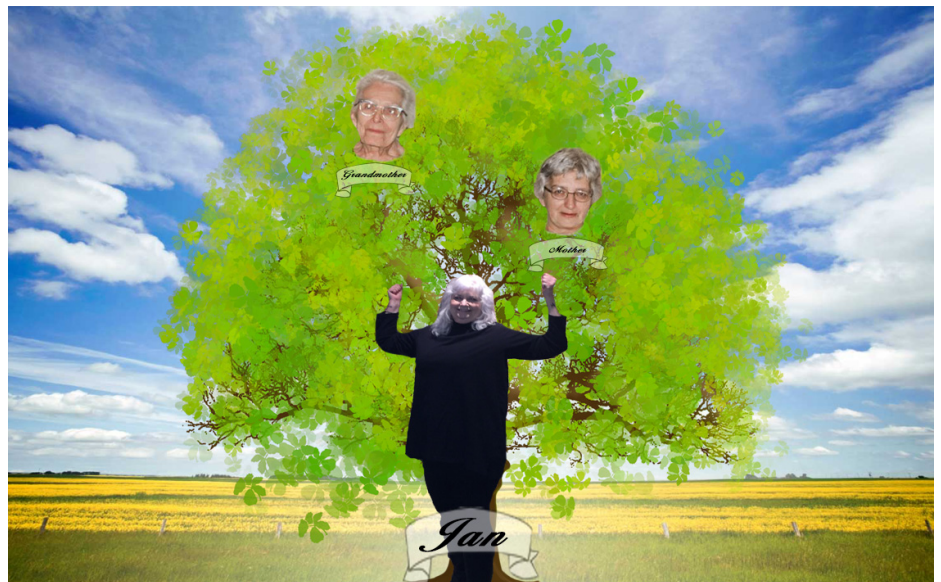


Figure 2: Jan expresses that she comes from a solid line of powerful women that made her the strong and compassionate leader she is.

Jan explains that she never partook in any formal leadership training in order to prepare for her positions. As Hernandez and Fraynd (2014) presented in their article, Jan never formally planned on becoming a leader. Leadership was instead a “*path that sort of evolved through a natural progression of getting involved and using the bar as a soap box*” (Ethnographic Interview of Jan Lancaster, October 14th). Jan frequently mentions that she uses her bar as her soap box, holding events, fundraisers, and community meetings to announce and promote LGBTQI issues.

Presentation of Data:

Through our methods of photo feedback, participant-observation, ethnographic interviewing, and collaboration in the creation of photos, we unpacked the four most important aspects of Jan's leadership role. Starting with the value she places on listening to the stories of LGBTQI in need, Jan finds that the best way to connect with her patrons is to simply hear what they have to say. Figure 3 demonstrates

Jan's commitment to listening to all members. Those who identify as LGBTQI are often struggling with their identity and in accepting who they are. Jan provides a compassionate ear to listen and shows them that they are not alone. It is this attention to what her LGBTQI friends have to say that allows so many of them to gain confidence and feel less alone in the world.



Figure 3: Jan attributes her success as a leader to the value she places on simply listening to those who are struggling.

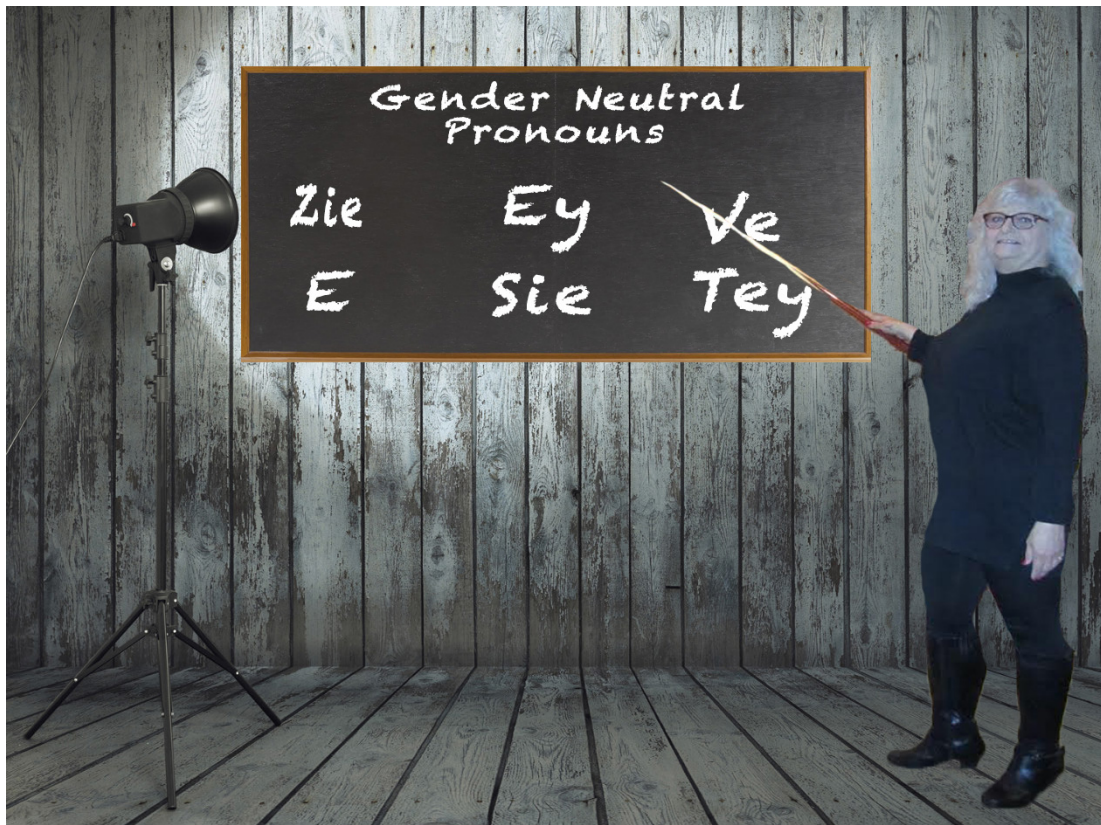


Figure 4: Jan stresses the need for constant education of LGBTQI community attributes, such as the appropriate pronouns, to best understand and connect to her LGBTQI friends, but also to correct the many misconceptions about the community.

During our research together, Jan emphasized the constant self-education of issues and sensitivities of LGBTQI. Just as Miller and Vaccaro (2016) presented the significance of not only avoiding heteronormativity, but how leaders of LGBTQI communities must always be educated on the members they are leading. Jan wishes to disprove any misguided assumptions people have about LGBTQI through properly educating them on the facts. Figure 4 illustrates this point of how Jan stresses not only educating others, but keeping herself educated on such aspects as the appropriate pronoun each person prefers, as to prevent insulting or mistreating any of her LGBTQI friends. Jan also speaks of assuring heteronormativity is never preferred or privileged, instead being open and welcoming to all identities. As Jan said herself, “*nothing here is straight*” while taking photos in The Bistro together on October 24th. As a leader, she never stops learning and wants the world to realize that education is key to understanding and helping a community.

Figure 5 depicts how Jan uses The Bistro to speak about LGBTQI issues and host events, such as the peace vigil she organized last July for the Orlando Victims. Jan is the Board Chair of the Central Illinois Pride Health Center, which will provide care without judgment or discrimination based on race, color, ethnicity, age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability. The Bistro is Jan's platform to announce and promote this clinic, which will open within the next three years.



Figure 5: Jan takes advantage of the popularity of her bar, The Bistro, using it as a soapbox to promote LGBTQI causes and agendas.

Jan accentuates the need for more diversity and education of LGBTQI culture in the Bloomington-Normal community. Figure 6 illustrates Jan's enhancement of diversity in our town by throwing diverse "people" onto our streets. The lack of diversity causes her members to be mistreated and misunderstood. She believes that the answer to the frequent discrimination against immigrants and those who identify as LGBTQI is an increase in understanding and appreciation.



Figure 6: Jan feels very strongly about advancing diversity in Bloomington-Normal, asserting that the more diverse the community is, the less discrimination the minorities will face.



Figure 7: Jan's welcoming and caring spirit is portrayed through her act of creating a home with her bar and hosting a thanksgiving dinner for LBTQI members who are not accepted by their own families.

Figure 7 represents the crucial aim of Jan and her bar, to create a welcoming home-like environment for the LGBTQI community. She sees herself as a protector of her patrons and allies, guarding them from the cruel injustices LGBTQI members often face. Jan describes how every Thanksgiving and Christmas, she hosts a “family dinner” in her bar for all the members who cannot go home for the holidays because they are not accepted by their families. The Bistro, for many LGBTQI members/allies, serves as a place where they can be themselves and feel 100% accepted. It is not only her home, but also a home for those who do not have one.

Data Analysis:

The research I conducted on Bloomington's LGBTQI community and their leader Jan, supports the majority of my initial assumptions. As I assumed, Jan is extremely welcoming, inclusive, and accepting. She did find inspiration from a mentor, her mother, and noticed that there was a strong female influence among leadership in Bloomington. One of my most prominent assumptions was that Jan would understand the significance of self-education in terms of sensitivity and knowledge of the intersecting identities and struggles her LGBTQI face.

The results of our research do not correlate exactly with my assumptions about stereotyping and discrimination of female leaders. Jan expresses that she never feels discriminated against because she is a woman. She also never feels the need to tone down her emotions, as some of the sources I consulted suggested women leaders do. The findings the articles presented on what it takes to lead a LGBTQI

community, however, greatly compare to Jan's own opinions. The creation of safe spaces, knowledge of sensitivity and experience, and the inspiration of a mentor were all discussed by both the authors and Jan.

One component that is not mentioned in the articles specifically is the need for more diversity in communities like Bloomington-Normal. The researchers do not cite the number of LGBTQI members compared to the population of the city or whether they are represented as a minority in their identification as non-straight, non-white, or non-American. This is a point, however, that Jan feels needs to be addressed in our city. Jan is perhaps not outwardly a typical member of the LGBTQI group, as she does not identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or intersex. However, she is a typical member of this group because the group accepts everyone, not just those who identify as LGBTQI and Jan stands as an ally who cares for and fights for the community's rights.

Mainstream America prefers people who are white, American-born, straight, and middle class. The LGBTQI community is separate from this because of their sexual orientation. Although members of this specific LGBTQI community do not always identify within the LGBTQI acronym, the majority are not straight Americans. The traditions and characteristics of the LGBTQI are passed on through associations like The Bistro. As a soapbox, the values of creating safe, home-like, and protective spaces will be passed along and maintained through its' structure, even if Jan is not the one leading. Jan expresses her hopes for an employee of The Bistro or a friend to take over ownership, so she can ensure that the traditions and beliefs of the community are being maintained.

My findings relate to the larger anthropological issue of societal conformity. Although Jan and her bar are very popular, she does highlight the struggles she faced early on in her career. As I have learned through my studies in Anthropology, if one does not conform to the "standard" American, (white, straight, middle-class) one is treated as inferior. Jan describes young men physically assaulting her patrons and still to this day, some of Jan's LGBTQI friends have not come out in the workplace because they feel they will not be accepted. Jan explained that people walking downtown cross the street in order to avoid walking next to the bar. The community, and Jan as their leader, are treated as inferior because they are different.

Conclusions:

This collaborative ethnographic research process exceeded my expectations. As seen in Figure 8, Jan was more than willing to participate and was thrilled to share her insights into the LGBTQI community. My research goals were to focus on Jan herself and how she defines her success as a leader. This was achieved through our joint effort in creating visual metaphors that accurately represent her goals of creating a home for those who do not have one, educating others and herself on the LGBTQI community, promoting diversity in our city, and using her bar as a soap box to promote LGBTQI causes. I was able to understand *how* Jan leads and what she feels is most important about her role.



Figure 8: Jan and I discuss collaboratively how she wishes to represent herself through visual metaphors.

It is possible that I brought some bias to the study as I assumed that my experience with Jan would be positive. I found Jan to be inspiring and perhaps I glorified aspects of her story and only focused on the successes of her leadership career. It would be interesting for future researchers to examine how other community leaders, members, and allies' opinions of leaders relate to his/her own. The process of working with "Momma" has been truly rewarding. I have gained a deeper understanding of what it really takes to be an inspiring, caring, and passionate woman leader.

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