

Behind OurChart

How To Go Green

Geeky Girls

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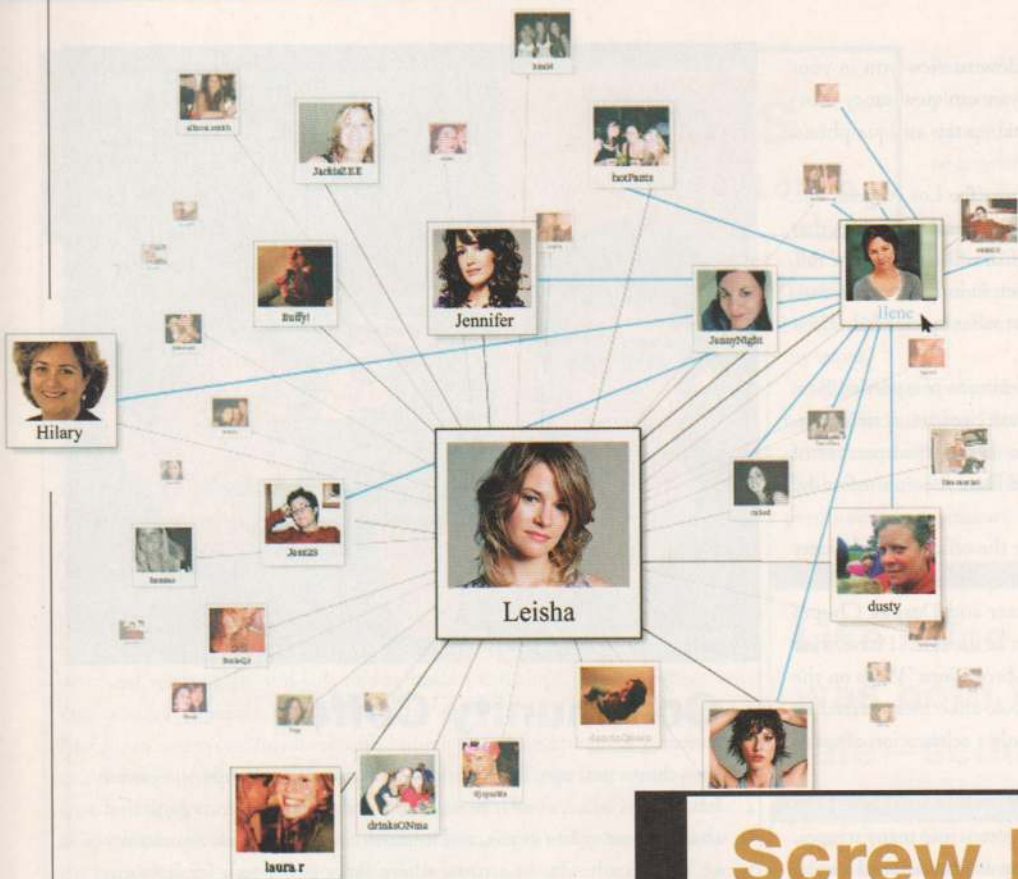
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Companies We Love



AFTER LAUNCHING less than a year ago OurChart.com has quickly become one of the most visited and populated forums devoted to lesbians on the Web. The site had 500,000 individual visits in its first three months and its steady growth clearly shows that the company's promotional theatrics have paid off.

Advertised within the storyline of Showtime's *The L Word* and touted by cast members in segments surrounding episodes of season four, OurChart, owned in part by the show's creator, Ilene Chaiken, was conceived not just as a spinoff fan site with behind-the-scenes footage but rather as a technological marvel, providing voice and connective tissue to an international lesbian community poised to take some of the creative reins into its own hands. What started as a cute model of the six (or two) degrees of separation between lesbians everywhere has become a literal cyberspace "friends tree" and communication venue.

While OurChart has not quite conquered the entire dyke world, it has become a popular alternative to MySpace, designed for and by queer women, as well as a premier site for quality media content and lesbian blogs. The president of the company, Hilary Rosen, is the former head of the Recording Industry Association of America. She spoke with *CURVE* about the site's exciting features, the brains behind the business and the business behind this burgeoning lesbian online community.

Viewers of *The L Word* already know the story of how Alice starts obsessively charting lesbian hookups and, in season four, turns her "chart" into a Web site. What is the story of how the real OurChart got started?

Early last summer, Kara Swisher, a tech guru who writes for *The Wall Street Journal*, and Ilene Chaiken came up with the idea of putting the chart online and creating an online social network. They came to me to help raise the money and design the business end. Ilene has felt for a long time that

The L Word has been a social connection for lesbians in a really unique way. With the advent of a huge number of social networks online, it made perfect sense to take that experience and see what else we could do with it. So we came up with the plan and talked to Jennifer [Beals], Leisha [Hailey], and Kate [Moennig], because we knew that if we were going to be successful we had to have the actors involved.

Those three went in as partners, correct? Is that a financial as well as a spokesperson level of support?

Yes, they are owners and founders. Kara knew a woman named Beth Callaghan, who had been the editor-in-chief at PlanetOut.com for many years. She came in as our technology partner. So basically, the seven of us created this social network with the chart at the center of it. In large measure because of Ilene, Kate, Leisha and Jennifer, who have a lot of creative ideas, we wanted to make sure it was a haven for additional creative content.

Screw MySpace!

OurChart has more to offer. By Candace Moore

Why the decision to marry these different formats—to include media content and webisodes along with editorial pieces, blogs and networking?

We felt we had something unique to offer. There were lesbian news sites, there were lesbian travel sites, there were fledgling lesbian dating sites, but nothing that, in our view, combined the stickiness of a social network with original content. One of the reasons a lot of sites don't create original programming is because it's expensive, and these sites don't tend to generate much revenue. So it's really an investment in getting more users and the series paying off. With respect to the original content, we are going to commission as much as we can and do as much as we can. So hopefully, that will be several good original series a year and several shorter video projects.

I noticed OurChart has a photo journal of lesbian nightlife. Sort of the real face of what *The L Word* portrays.

The corresponding piece is people's own individual L Worlds. The party scene is fun. It's our own little TMZ meets YouTube. User generated. We're open to people's ideas for more of that.

Do you think that people's comfort with the MySpace and Friendster formats has made the transition to this forum easier? When new users go to create profiles, they see something pretty familiar. Yet on OurChart you're also offered more options for describing your sexuality and gender, while MySpace has limited categories.

Well, if we can't get that right! This is a place for us, rather than being a place that someone else has made that welcomes us. I think most of the women who have profiles on the chart also have a MySpace or Facebook profile, and that's okay. The online world replicates a little bit how we experience

our lives, which is that we're very integrated for the most part, and assimilated. On the other hand, sometimes on a regular basis, we just want kind of the safety and comfort and sexiness of being with lesbians—using lesbian in the broadest sense of the word.

How much time does the average user spend on the site?

The industry average of page views on a Web site is something like three-and-a-half to four [minutes], and our average page views are like, 10 [minutes], so we know people are enjoying it.

If you were going to give advice to someone creating a business plan for a project like this, something that requires a lot of investment and time, what advice would you give them for starting out?

Aside from the general, really important emotional and spiritual mantra of believing in yourself, which is critical, I think from a practical business standpoint, it's know your scale. If you've got a product in service that's going to be most viable for a targeted group of people, start there and scale up to get wider. Sometimes, business dreams fail because people's dreams are too big and the execution falls short. It's important to be able to scale right at the beginning—and you can always scale up.

You definitely targeted users through *The L Word* and through advertising on Showtime. What is OurChart's relationship with Showtime? Do they have a share?

CBS and Showtime are principal investment partners. They've been great partners.

Are there other ways you targeted the lesbian community, outside of *The L Word*?

We spent the first three quarters focusing on getting our technical features right, developing some deep content and preparing ourselves for the next level. Like most social networks, we haven't spent any money on marketing or advertising.

You've let it go through word of mouth.

Totally viral! For the most part we continue to take that approach, but we're starting to partner with organizations like the National Center for Lesbian Rights and the Human Rights Campaign and AfterEllen.com and places in the community where we can share traffic and trade. We strongly believe that this is an ecosystem that benefits from everybody working together and sharing each other's users and partners and information. We think of this as coop-etition as opposed to competition on all fronts. This whole market is poised for exciting growth, and hopefully, we'll be right up there.

What do you think that OurChart has to offer lesbians that a more general site like MySpace doesn't?

MySpace in particular has gotten pretty messy. OurChart is an environment where people can come and find something in common with everybody and move through the network with a sense of interest and safety that I don't think you can find as a queer woman on any other site.

And how would you compare OurChart to sites like Gay.com, which offers chatting features as well as content?

First of all, [Gay.com is] very male focused, so there's no comparison in terms of the size of the lesbian user community. We're just so much larger. You can look at our content and see that we're lesbian focused, and that makes the chart experience that much better.

Could you tell us about any new site features coming around the bend?

The thing that our users are talking to us most about right now are additional technical features they want, so in the next two months we'll be adding videos, photos, we'll be adding more inter-user transparency—so that you can see what other people are doing on the site—and a richer forum and

discussion. And of course, we will be adding the all-important Friends Plus, which was the essence of the chart originally.

Yeah, Alice's chart was about charting hookups.

Not starting with hookups was a very deliberate strategy on our part. We felt that as exciting and titillating as it was on the show, it was probably intimidating in an online environment, right away.

There could be privacy issues, perhaps?

We weren't so worried about privacy issues, because you can't be added to somebody's chart unless you consent to it, but we really wanted to focus on building community. On the other hand, we know that people want that extra excitement and sexy factor, and so Friends Plus is on its way. People will be able to designate people who are [already] on their chart as a [past] hookup or a present hookup.

It seems like OurChart is becoming its own entity, separate from *The L Word*, while having been born by it, or in relationship to it. Are you going to have content on other lesbian-related TV shows or media?

What we are looking for is what's coming down the pike that's compelling.

We have a good relationship with AfterEllen.com. In terms of content sharing—they cover every lesbian who's ever sneezed in a movie or on a TV show, and that's what they do. We don't need to replicate that. So

when we have unique behind-the-scenes access to something, or when we have an actor or a creator who's reaching beyond an audience, I think we see us as "value added" to some of those other efforts and not as a recap or review site.

What have Jennifer, Leisha and Kate been working on lately with regards to the site, and what is their level of involvement on a month-to-month basis?

Jennifer is loving selecting the photographs. I think she is going to be doing more [of that], and I think we are going to be offering her photographs for sale.

Leisha's really busy with her band now, and we're talking about ways to integrate some of her band's activities onto the site. Kate just did a fabulous piece with homeless youth in New York City, "My Address," and she's very interested in social justice and will continue to work on projects like that. Right now they're all in production, so we're spending time on behind-the-scenes *L Word* stuff for them. Once production ends in October, we'll start again with some original projects.

How would you describe OurChart's appeal to someone who has not yet seen it?

The big challenge with online social networks is finding a reason for people to keep coming back. What's most compelling about OurChart is that our users, the ones who keep coming back, they're telling us that they're making friends all over the world, they're learning about new music and movies and political views that they hadn't experienced before, and their worlds are expanding just a little. Considering the media onslaught that we all experience, with the multitude of online sites and the multitude of offline media, to know that there is one place you can go to that is always going to efficiently satisfy you is a great thing. ■



Girl Love Goes International

Lesbian romantic comedies aren't just a U.S. speciality. | **By Candace Moore**



Nina's Heavenly Delight

Lesbian rom-coms have certainly become more plentiful, and they've also gotten thematically broader lately. These new feel-good flicks feature an ensemble cast, and while two girls in love is still the typical plotline, family, friends and intertwined strangers create full, complex story arcs.

Nina's Heavenly Delights (Regent Releasing)

The delights of director Pratibha Parmar's new film register on all the senses. After skipping out on an arranged marriage to Sanjay Khanna (Raji James), the heir to Glasgow curry house The Jewel in the Crown, Nina Shah (Shelley Conn) returns to Scotland to attend her father's funeral. When she finds out that her dad entered their family restaurant, The New Taj, into a curry competition before he died, Nina takes up his cause of returning the eatery to its former glory rather than selling out to the Khannas. With the help of her cute neighbor Lisa, who turns up the heat on her sauces, as well as the cheers of her family and friends and a few spiritual cooking lessons from her dad's ghost, Nina battles the finalist chefs (including Sanjay) in her father's place. When Lisa makes it clear that she'd like to do more for Nina than prep in the kitchen, Nina finds the courage to "follow her heart." Full of Indian-accented Scottish brogues, Bollywood dance numbers camped up by the "Chutney Queens," colorful costumes and mouthwatering dishes parading across the screen, *Nina's Heavenly Delights* simmers with sensual and multicultural pleasures. The movie is as much about honor-

ing family and tradition as it is about enjoying and celebrating variety. As Nina learns, it's not about precision ingredients, it's about pleasure, trust and love. (regentreleasing.com)

Tick Tock Lullaby (Valiant Doll)

Tick Tock is an elegant and irreverent British comedy about two 30-something lesbians who decide to become parents, go about "stalking" sperm and come to grips with how improvisational their adulthood still feels. Sasha (Lisa Gornick) is a cartoonist who's set up housekeeping with saucy attorney Maya (Raquel Cassidy). In love, the two are also constantly at play, tumbling about in the park, riding each other like horsies in the living room, calling whomever mounts the other (sexually) "Big Boy." As they collaborate and carp over which one will get preggers first and expose their fears about measuring up as moms, Sasha's ink-wash drawings and contemplative voiceovers guide a mercilessly funny exploration of their undertaking. Posed hypotheticals, intimate experiences and made-up characters line-drawn within Sasha's comic come to life in the film, as it cuts musically between art, life and the imagined lives of two straight women who are also trying to get knocked up. The actors reveal every scrap of their quirky characters, and the camera catches many expressions that ring true—the face one gives when telling a necessary lie to a lover or sneaking a smoke—along with self-conscious ones—when the script and actors simply outsmart and strip down the guise of the film, peel it away and hit home.



EDITOR'S PICK

Exes and Ohs (Logo): If you haven't caught Michelle Paradise in an episode of Logo's new *Exes and Ohs*, run to the TV remote and catch it while fresh eps are still airing. This sexy and hilarious series from director Lee Friedlander and writer/star Michelle Paradise, is the television adaptation of their funny and sardonic short film *The Rules: A Lesbian Survival Guide*. Paradise plays a not-so-recently dumped documentary filmmaker with an active imagination, bringing to the role a dyke-next-door vibe and superb comic timing. With a cast of sexy, kooky and sublime friends like Sam (Marnie Alton) and Gen Y-er Crutch (Heather Matarazzo), *Exes* is thoroughly engaging. But beyond Paradise there's one other scene stealer in the show: actor Megan Cavanagh. That chick—who's been in everything from *Home Improvement* and *A League of Their Own* to *Jimmy Neutron* and *Friends*—is freakin' hilarious. Catch it in reruns if you have to. (logoonline.com)
— DAM

Q+A

Irena Fayngold



Director Irena Fayngold's documentary *Hineini* (boston-keshet.org) is about a teen's struggle to form a gay-straight alliance in her Jewish high school in Boston and how the process changed everyone, including four closeted gay teachers who came out. Fayngold tells *CURVE* about the experience. — *Sheela Lambert*

What does hineini mean?

Hineini is Hebrew for "here I am."

Why this documentary? What were you hoping to show people by documenting Shulamit's struggle?

I wanted to show what it takes to make change. Shulamit is so successful not just because she is brave. One of her greatest strengths as a leader is her ability to reach out to others. She took risks by seeking out students and teachers who

would help her. They could have rejected her—and some did. But she took that risk and because of it many did step up. This is not one girl's story. It takes a community of people to change an institution and her strength was that she was able to understand that.

I was amazed by the catalyst effect Shulamit had on her school. Eventually, four teachers who had been in the closet came out. I was surprised that there were any gay teachers at a religious school, let alone four.

I think that gay teachers, even closeted ones, were attracted to this school because it was pluralistic [inclusive of orthodox, conservative, reform and secular students]. The New Jewish High School of greater Boston took on the challenge of pluralism very sincerely. How often in our daily lives are we given a chance to openly and respectfully engage with a person who has opposing points of view? This happened every day at the school.

Were there any surprises? Challenges?

Our biggest challenge was access to the school. The day after our first video shoot for *Hineini* we got a phone call from the headmaster, Rabbi Lehmann. The school board voted to deny us permission to film on school property, reversing Lehmann's decision to allow it. It was a huge hurdle for us. How could we tell a visual story about a school without any video images of it? Fortunately, after two and half years of production, the board finally reversed its decision. So it's a good thing it took us so long to make.

As a woman with a husband and a baby, what was your connection to the queer community at the time you started out, and how has doing this film deepened your understanding?

I am very happily married to a man, but I think deep down I am bi. Since I had questioned my own sexuality at one time in my life, this gave me some insight as I began to do research and meet the students and teachers I would interview for the film.

In the film, Shulamit thought it might be her calling to reinterpret the Torah in light of her understanding that being Jewish and gay is OK. Has she followed up on that?

Shulamit is entering rabbinical school this upcoming fall at the Reconstructionist Seminary. ■

Honest sex talk is fluid here and isn't all tied up in identity, but the film also revels in role-play and fantasy as the intellectual equivalent of sex. The film asks, How can we play out our curiosities? The film also provides the answer: through the imagination and through art itself. Lisa Gornick wrote, directed, produced, starred in (and drew!) this film. A rarity: smart, light, deep, fun, very witty and very queer. (valiantdoll.co.uk)

Out at the Wedding (Goff-Kellam Productions)

Lee Friedlander's newest film has the edginess, humanity and humor of her last, *Girl Play*, but this time her work looks less low-budget—and *Out at the Wedding's* not just slicker, it's more fully realized. A string of plot dominos first gets flicked when New Yorker Alex (Andrea Marcellus), back in the South for her sister's wedding, is confronted with the rumor that she's a lesbian. Jonathan (Charlie Schlatter) is Alex's gay best friend and is as close to a stereotype as possible without inviting GLAAD hate mail. Schlatter, however, charmingly carries Jonathan off with such malevolent glee (he's renovating a fixer-upper boyfriend by slowly starving and secretly exercising him) that the character actually works and, not only that, provides hilarity. Unknown to her family, the very straight Alex has already accepted a ring from a guy (Mystro Clark) she clearly loves, but she's so afraid of telling the Wonder Breads that he's half black that she enacts her own form of racism, assuming the family will digest girl-on-girl better than interracial love. (OK, there's definitely room to be offended here.) Things get infinitely more palatable, though, when all the film's characters start to talk about how crummy Alex's paradigm is. Things also improve when Risa (Cathy DeBuono), a softball-loving, sober, vegan handywoman (who is mad handsome!) literally falls in Alex's lap. So what does Alex do, at Jonathan's urging? When her sister flies into the Big Apple to meet Alex's new Sapphic sweetie, she pays Risa to pretend to be starry-eyed, but not to fall head over heels. Foolishness ensues, but old and newfound family ties prevail. With unapologetic, fast-paced humor, this movie pokes fun at the masquerades we so often make ourselves play. (goffkellam.com)



Out at the Wedding