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BY GAINING VISIBILITY in the mainstream marketplace, LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) individuals, businesses and performance artists are making headway in their fight for equal rights. But it is a slow process that has taken decades to make progress.

Many argue that it was the riots at the Stonewall Inn that sparked the gay rights movement in America. And while that fight could be considered a catalyst which has helped to reverse many statewide and national bans on homosexual acts, and has even brought about some extra protections under the laws in various individual states, such as gay marriage and child adoption rights in Connecticut and Massachusetts, others argue that icons such as Oscar Wilde or those who suffered through lobotomies practiced by the American Psychological Association or genital mutilation from the Nazis are the only ones that deserve the credit.

Regardless, it seems as though anyone persecuted for being homosexual or having engaged in homosexual acts and having experienced homophobia because of that has the right to be considered a pioneer in the gay rights movement.

The fight, however, ensues even today with the growing fury over the California statewide ban on gay marriage, entitled Proposition 8, which prompted millions of gay activists and supporters to participate in marches nationwide. Proposition 8, supported mostly by the Mormon Church, overturned the California Supreme Court's decision allowing for unions to take place in the state.



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the new face of gay

STEPHEN J. LUCIN, VICE PRESIDENT OF LEADING GAY PUBLIC RELATIONS FIRM GRAPEVINE MUSES ON THE CHANGING FACE OF THE LGBT MARKETPLACE



LEFT: KEN HUNT OF CHELSEA'S STEEL GYM | ABOVE: ENRIQUE RAMIREZ OF FACE TO FACE NYC | OPPOSITE PAGE: AWARD-WINNING RECORDING ARTIST ARI GOLD

But regardless of one setback in the struggle over gay rights, gays are pushing forward in the professional arena. Openly gay actors Neil Patrick Harris (*Doogie Howser, M.D.*) and Cheyenne Jackson (*Xanadu*), along with television personalities Ellen DeGeneres and Rachel Maddow (MSNBC's *The Rachel Maddow Show*) certainly help to bring a greater visibility to the gay community. Their successes in their respective industries show the younger generation, as well as the broader public, that gay people are simply people who happen to be gay and that no single person can represent the diverse gay community.

But in a smaller, though not at all irrelevant sense, young and up-and-coming gay people, artists and business owners are helping to shape the gay community in the 21st century. Becoming a household name is no longer the greatest achievement within this oft-sidelined community. But rather building a rapport and finding a sense of belonging within the mainstream public is the greatest goal.

One such gay business owner has watched his business grow within the niche gay market so much so that nearly 70 per cent of his clients are gay men. Owner and lead aesthetician **Enrique Ramirez** of *face to face nyc*, a New York City-based day spa which is known for its somewhat risqué beauty treatments and racy ads, is the force behind a movement that encompasses a growing number of businesses similar to his. A leader in his own right, Ramirez is a pioneer in the trend of out gay entrepreneurs of the 21st century. >

Another openly gay business pioneer of the 21st century is **Ken Hunt** of Chelsea's Steel Gym. He has taken a gym, which in the past had a reputation that was subpar prior to his ownership of the establishment, and transformed it into one of the leading workout venues in New York City for those devoted to fitness. Accepting everyone from all walks of life, Hunt also appeals to individuals who might not otherwise find comfort in any other workout venue. Creating specific workout routines for individuals who are HIV-positive, those who may have an overactive thyroid or people who may simply be looking to gain a little weight to add muscle, Hunt helps everyone develop and achieve their goals. Leading by example, Hunt exemplifies and epitomises what it means to be a pioneer within the 21st century. By opening a business that accepts everyone and brings the gay community closer to the mainstream, he is a leader in the charge against homophobia.

Matt Skallerud, owner of Pink Banana Media and founder of GayWired.com, has compiled one of the most comprehensive reports on the buying power of the gay community entitled the Gay Market Report. Included in the report, which helps businesses and individuals better market themselves to the gay community, is the fact that there is a \$712 billion-a-year market with LGBT consumers. These results are some of the first available to modern-day business owners seeking to expand their market reach into this niche community. His figures come second to the research done by Witeck-Combs and Harris Interactive, which have conducted research into other areas of the LGBT community.

Other such pioneers may not be business owners per se, but share in their quest for entrepreneurship. Gay indie film director **Casper Andreas**, who is set to begin production on his fourth film, seeks to merge gay and mainstream audiences through his films. And while the themes of Andreas, who was recently honored with an OUT 100 award, are mainly centered on gay life and gay characters, they also include parallels to straight lives and how both gay and straight people endure similar situations in both life and love.

Guest House Films, a movie production company founded by life partners Rob Williams and Rodney Johnson, is another leader within the community. Focusing mostly on issues relevant to the gay community of the 21st century, this duo, also named "Leading Men of 2008" by *Instinct* magazine, bring the conversation of gay rights into the living rooms of their viewers.

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Amanda Lepore stands as one of the LGBT community's most admired success stories. As a transsexual, she has smashed all sorts of glass ceilings and has set herself up as a role model...

ABOVE: THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS TRANSEXUAL, AMANDA LEPORE. BELOW LEFT: GAY INDIE FILM DIRECTOR CASPER ANDREAS. BELOW: STEPHEN LUCIN OF GRAPEVINE PR



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But no one has made it further in all aspects of entrepreneurship than the world's most famous transsexual, **Amanda Lepore**. Club Kid turned "tranny" mogul, Lepore has recently toured worldwide in countries such as Sweden, Turkey, Russia, France, among many others. She has launched a cosmetics line, a signature perfume, a doll, various music albums, an exclusive Swatch watch and has appeared in films like *Party Monster* and *Another Gay Sequel*, and music videos by legendary artists like Elton John. She has also been the muse for leading photographers David LaChapelle and Justin Monroe, and has even become the fashion face for labels Heatherette, M.A.C. and Mego Jeans. Her endeavours have created one of the most highly respected brands internationally, which continues to open the eyes of everyone who meets her.

Amanda Lepore stands as one of the LGBT community's most admired success stories. As a transsexual, she has smashed all sorts of glass ceilings and has set herself up as a role model for almost anyone seeking to get ahead in life.

Overall, no matter who is responsible for the start of the gay rights movement, it is the people who continue the fight on a daily basis that deserve credit. But it is especially important not to forget the people who have joined the fight by opening businesses, by pursuing their dreams in spite of homophobia, or those who have persevered in bridging the gap between gay and mainstream communities.