

Mikel Gerle: IML 2007

At the most recent International Mr. Leather (IML) , Mikel Gerle, IML 2007, weighed in on several issues.

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by Shawn Schikora

"I was worried whether we [in the leather community] needed to be more exclusive or more inclusive, and I realize that we need to be both," Mikel Gerle, International Mister Leather (IML) 2007, explained in a recent interview at the Hyatt Regency during the IML convention of leathermen held annually in Chicago over the Memorial Day weekend. "If we're going to really be diverse, we need to have some diversity. [Yet] we have this [attitude] , 'We have to be all things to all people, all the time,' and we need to be 'beige.' To me, if we're really going to be a rainbow, then you need to respect my differences and I need to respect your differences."

Gerle—who, before winning IML last year, held the title of Mr. Los Angeles Leather 2007 and Old Can Harry's Mr. Leather 2007—felt that "the leather community right now is in a fantastic place." Yet, he quickly added with a hearty laugh, "but it is absolutely not cohesive! I don't know if it ever will be, anymore than any other community. It is a collection of very diverse people, [including] everything from gay people to straight people. You could split up all the fetishes—people into rubber, people into gear—and there are fetishes within those various groups. So, we can keep splitting ourselves up. But, there's a swell of dignity within the leather community, and this surge of young people that ... don't know a lot about fear and shame, and that's wonderful. Yeah, I don't think there's a problem there."

An area that does trouble Gerle is apathy, both in and out of the leather community. Explained Gerle—who is 42 and a resident of West Hollywood, where he works as a management specialist and city academy coordinator—"Right now ... all I can think of is the upcoming election, and the fact that we need to understand that less than three hundred votes can change a presidential election. And that is any small segment of the population. So, the gay vote does matter. Apathy is really the thing we're facing [in the gay community] . A lot of us are comfortable, especially those of us in big cities, [believing] we've come a long way. Even in California, there's been a lot of discussion of 'Why are we pushing this marriage thing? It's comfortable enough already.' And, thank God, not everybody was thinking that, because there were enough people who said 'No, we're still not [considered] equal. It's not time to relax yet.' And we have the Supreme Court in California now saying that same-sex marriages are legal. We still have to fight people to keep that and the Constitution from being changed, but apathy would have kept us where we were before."

Being both heavily involved in and a representative of a segment of society not always understood by many, both gay and straight, has altered Gerle's attitude of tolerance versus respect regarding the leather community. "My step-down speech [at IML 2008] was about tolerance," he explained. "I actually said that I think ... it's time to move beyond tolerance, and towards respect. That came up because I had a conversation with my parents and I thought, 'I can't be "tolerated" anymore.' I want to be respected as a full member of the family. Tolerance just isn't enough, I don't want to accept a second class place. Tolerance is great, but I would like the outside world to respect us, and I would like us to respect each other, and our differences within the community. I think all of trying to 'tolerate' everybody has muted us, made us all so pc, that we can't talk about our differences. So, I would like us to move beyond tolerance into respect."

Yet, while he hopes society will become both more accepting of the leather community, he hopes to relax a bit now that his reign as IML 2007 has ended.

Speaking of the hectic pace as IML, Gerle said, "When you're traveling as IML, it's frustrating that you can't do as many things [as you'd like] . You don't have time to produce anything, you [only] have time to show a pack, show up, give a speech, make appearances, get your picture taken, judge a contest, get on a plane, go back and work a regular job—then, next week, do it all over again. So, I found that really frustrating by the end of the year."

However, one of Gerle's most important personal accomplishments as IML was "going to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. They have a 'Creating Change' conference, and they gave a leather leadership award to [previous IML winner] Guy Baldwin this year, and asked if I would present it to him. They gave me two minutes to talk about Guy and what the leather community means to me in front of a primarily non-leather group. And the feedback from my non-leather brothers and sisters was amazing! That was one of the high points, and I think it went really, really well because I think people got to hear from us rather than just see us march by in the parade [thinking] , "Who are those guys?"

Gerle's charitable involvement includes working with a large number of organizations, including the Van Ness Recovery Center and the LGBT sober convention; he has also run in the Honolulu AIDS Marathon, benefiting APLA (AIDS Project Los Angeles) , and has participated in two AIDS LifeCycle rides. Regarding his future plans, Gerle hopes to, "get involved in mentoring and education—that's one of the greatest gifts I got this year—I learned so much, so many different things." He added, with a laugh, " [Otherwise,] I'm going to do a lot of camping, [laughs] I'm gonna ride my bicycle and my motorcycle and rollerblading. People will not see a lot of me. I plan on taking it [easier] for a while."