

Harassed gays seek protection

By **RONNIE COHEN**
Of the Emerald

City council considers ordinance

"This guy came over to where I was standing and started to pull my clothes off. Pulled open my overalls. Ripped them open. And started to pull on my shirt," says lesbian Jean Lorraine, recalling a December night when six young men attacked the clientele of a gay Eugene bar.

"We struggled. Some other people pulled him off of me while I tried to hit him back. Pretty soon there was just a total brawl. Only it wasn't your average barroom brawl.

"It was because they came into the Riviera Room intending to hurt us that it started."

Lorraine says this isn't Eugene's only incident of "queer bashing."

"Gays are subject to more physical violence than any other group in Oregon today," says

University law school Prof. Dominick Vetri, a vocal gay-rights advocate and state American Civil Liberties Union executive board member.

"The problem exists and therefore needs to be remedied."

A proposed city ordinance — drafted by the city attorney's office, the Human Rights Council and the human rights staff — would address gay harassment along with harassment of racial, religious and physically handicapped minorities, says city human rights specialist Kent Gorham.

Early last month the Eugene City Council asked the groups to draft an ordinance to deter racial harassment.

After the council studies the ordinance and makes any amendments, the city will hold

public hearings on the ordinance in early June, Gorham says.

Although no law can put a stop to gay harassment, the ordinance would send a clear message to the violence-prone, says Lorraine, who moved and changed her phone number because she was afraid her assailant would find her and hurt her again after the Riviera Room incident.

"Society has to change," Lorraine says. "We have to make a statement as a group that 'Racism is wrong;' that 'Firing somebody from a job because they're homosexual is wrong;' that 'It's not okay for you to hurt somebody because you don't understand them.'"

The current draft of the ordinance increases the penalties for assault and battery by about 100 percent when a prosecutor

proves the crime was committed with the intention of harassing a minority, Gorham says.

The ordinance imposes the maximum penalties the city now can levy against offenders, Gorham says.

If the council approves the current draft of the ordinance, an assailant would not have to hurt the victim physically for the ordinance to apply. A victim only would have to prove that there was imminent physical harm, Gorham says.

However, the proposed ordinance does not face an issue Lorraine says she would like to see addressed — job discrimination against homosexuals.

An amendment to Eugene's human rights ordinance protected gays against such discrimination for a few months until Eugene voters repealed it in 1978.

Community Christian Concern director Mike O'Brien successfully campaigned for the amendment's repeal. O'Brien says he disagrees with the proposed ordinance for the same reasons he opposed including gays in the human rights ordinance.

Such legal measures "leave the door open for people to claim prejudice when there is none," he says. "Anyone can bring a charge based on what they perceive to be prejudice."

Still, O'Brien says he agrees with the intent of the ordinance. He just fears people will misuse it because "prejudice is so intangible and so difficult to prove."

LeJune Perrin, a black lesbian and secretary of the University's Minority Law Students Association, shares O'Brien's concerns about the possibility of a minority-harassment ordinance being misused.

But Perrin says she's afraid the ordinance could have a backlash effect, resulting in the arrest of minorities for harassing non-minorities.

Although she's afraid of a backlash effect, Perrin says she believes the city should pass at least one ordinance aimed at deterring minority harassment.

However, gay harassment should be considered separately from racial harassment,

Perrin says. She says she's afraid that including gay harassment in the ordinance will weaken its chances of enforcement if the ordinance is accepted.

Community representatives estimate 2,500 practicing homosexuals and 1,700 blacks live in Eugene.

Despite the statistics, Perrin argues that legislation to protect blacks from harassment should be enacted before legislation to protect gays and lesbians.

"It's easier to hide your sexual orientation than it is to hide your race," she says.

But University Gay People's Alliance director David Ramirez, a hispanic, says racial and sexual-orientation harassment often are linked.

"They went together in Nazi Germany," Ramirez says. "Jews and homosexuals were both sent to the concentration camps."

Members of the black community also disagree with Perrin.

"It's not a black ordinance," says Willie Polite, Eugene chapter president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The ordinance should cover everyone who's getting harassed, says Polite, who originally asked the city council to enact a racial-harassment ordinance.

The homosexual community doesn't want to harm the black community's chances for protection through an anti-harassment ordinance, Vetri says.

"Most of the literature that comes out that's vehemently anti-black or anti-Jewish also is anti-gay," Vetri says. "To condemn because of racial harassment and to say nothing about sexual-orientation harassment is to give a signal that it's okay to do one but not the other."

Lorraine agrees with Vetri.

"The couple who was throwing racist literature out of their car, threw one in my yard," Lorraine says. The booklet slurred lesbians and gay men in the same way that it slurred other minorities, she says.

"This is a good opportunity for the minority groups to coalesce together to seek legislation that would attempt to bring an end to bigotry," Vetri says.

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