

Panel: Gays and lesbians shouldn't hide identities

By Rivers Janssen
Emerald Contributor

Homosexuality is not just a word or a feeling, it's a way of life that shouldn't be ignored, said a gay and lesbian rights panel on Friday.

University student Michael Lovelady said sexuality is a major part of a person's character. Just as heterosexuals are allowed to be free and open about their sexual orientation, gays and lesbians should enjoy the same privilege, he said.

"If you ignore a part of yourself, it keeps you from reaching your potential as a person," Lovelady said.

Lovelady was one of three panelists who spoke against homophobia and discrimination as part of the weeklong ASUO "Stop the Hate" symposium. The symposium was organized to educate students about bigotry and violence.

Other panel participants included ASUO member Wendy Curran and Doug Dewitt, Educational Outreach Coordinator for the Willamette Aids Council.

Curran encouraged gays and lesbians to acknowledge their sexual identity, saying the more people who are open about their sexual preferences, the more comfortable others will feel about coming out.

She said when she made the decision

to come out, her life became less of a struggle. Now "it's much easier to be happy and at ease with myself," she said. "As a straight woman, I was discriminated against anyway."

Dewitt said gays and lesbians face a unique set of distinctions from other minority groups. Using author Betty Burzon as a source, he listed some major differences, the most significant one being that there is a choice within the gay and lesbian communities whether to keep their sexual identity hidden.

Dewitt said people in powerful positions should come out because of their potential to help the cause. Although he doesn't want to force gays and lesbians

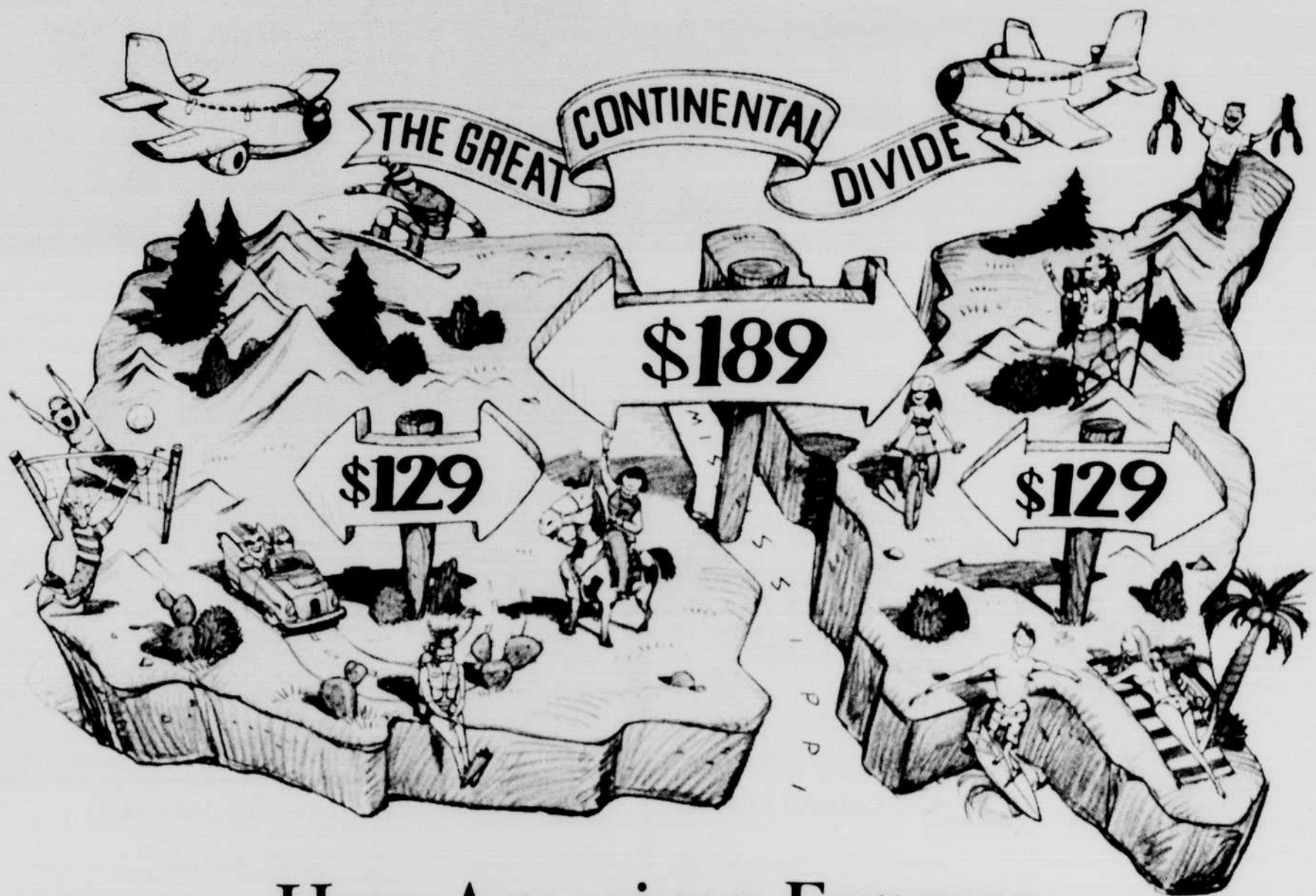
to come out against their will, he said by keeping silent they could be doing more harm than good.

Breaking silence was a common theme throughout the discussion, not just for gays and lesbians, but for heterosexuals as well.

Graduate student Bo Adan said people who keep silent are fostering the discrimination which already exists.

The panel encouraged people to get involved in gay and lesbian issues by attending meetings or marches, so they can increase their awareness on gay and lesbian issues.

"We have to take the responsibility to educate ourselves," Curran said.



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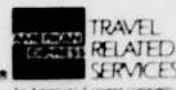
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