

Tribute to Jim Mahoney

by Billy Russo

On Sunday evening, December 16, the phone rang. My lover, Doug, answered it: "Oh, no!" he gasped. "That's terrible!" I could tell from his sorrowful tone that someone we knew had died. I waited for him to get off the phone and say who it was. "Jim Mahoney died," Doug said.

Jim Mahoney was a founding president of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance (GALA) of Douglas County. Jim was very active during the first year of GALA. He was there for that very first meeting November 29, 1980, at Mixed Company. Jim was a big man, square at the shoulders. His voice was deep and he wore a warm smile.

The man was a traditional patriarch in many ways. He was a well-respected Roseburg executive, a father and a grandfather. He was well informed, and like most of us, he was only out to trusted friends.

Jim was more sophisticated than most of the local men. He followed the growth of the homophile movement for many years and participated in some lesbian/gay activities in Eugene, Portland, Ashland and Northern California. He was one of the first men to realize the dangers of sexism within the movement and was one of the first local men to do something about it.

When Lillene Fifield, then co-president with Jim, established a gay men's consciousness raising committee, he was one of the first men to participate. Besides helping write the format, he facilitated the first

group to completion in our community. His perception of the dangers of sexism and his commitment to combatting it were powerful examples for other men of this community to follow.

Jim was there when the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard was formed. He played an active role in the first marathon training session we did in Myrtle Creek in 1981. He helped lay the foundation for Oregon's only 24 hour homophile helpline, a helpline that is still serving the community today.

The memory that I hold dearest of that year we worked together is the memory of the day he publicly came out. It was the first meeting between us and the local paper. Now, everyone in the paper knew Jim as a spokesperson for a local state agency. He was well-known. He was not known as a gay man.

You could have heard a pin drop in that big — big for Roseburg — bustling office when four admitted homosexuals walked through to the conference room at the other end. Jaws dropped when people started realizing that that was Jim Mahoney with us. It was very exciting for me.

It was a big day in his life. He was fully aware of the risk he was taking. I remember how he fidgeted when we grouped outside the building before we walked in. It takes a lot of courage to do what he did and I was proud to be there.

The meeting with the newspaper that day was quite fruitless. They wanted to do a story on the lesbian/gay community. That was okay with us, but we wanted final editing rights to the story. The editor said they'd never go for that.

Well, it took awhile. But three years later they gave in and we cooperated for five stories, one of which won a national award for the journalist. I believe to this day that the effect Jim's coming out had on those people

went a long way to raise their consciousness towards us.

Jim moved to Eugene near the end of 1981 to return to school. He wanted to do some graduate stuff and pursue a new career. He was about 50 years old then. He

remained in contact with us through these few years and was last here in Roseburg during the installation at MCC of Roseburg's first gay minister. His community awareness and his understanding of the group process has left a distinct mark on our community. He will be missed.

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