



The challenge of community

by Cathy Siemens

The day I arrived in Portland felt auspicious. The clear June afternoon in 1973 afforded a great view of the most evocatively female mountain I had ever seen, the intact version of Mt. St. Helens. At the time, my life seemed like a series of pit stops and at the ripe age of 22 I was ready to settle down.

I wanted to be part of a community. I wanted to live with a group of people who considered my well-being vital to theirs; to know them over time so we could watch each other and our children grow and develop. I wanted to understand and be understood. I wanted partners in making a better world.

It's been 13 years now. Mt. St. Helens and I have gone through some changes and so has the lesbian community. It's been a long strange trip from the fervor of the early seventies to the relative quiescence of the mid-eighties.

Back then many lesbians were eager and able to live on next to nothing so they could work on political and community projects. We created a bookstore, a resource center, a liberation school, a credit union, a health clinic, a battered women's shelter, and more.

What we accomplished was truly remarkable.

However, sometimes our zeal bordered on righteousness. The insight, "the personal is political," was stood on its head and became an excuse for scrutinizing an individual's clothing, her love-life, and her dinner. In retrospect, it's understandable how a nascent and beleaguered minority community, in order to develop identity and cohesiveness, would set norms that became rigid.

For those comfortable with the norms, the experience was validating, supportive, even liberating. On the other hand, for those uncomfortable with the norms, their experience was the opposite; unauthentic, hostile and confining. When correctness and conformity are greater values than community, mistakes and differences are occasions for ostracism rather than education and discussion.

We've learned that sisterhood isn't simple. It's as problematic as it is powerful. Politics are about people, not purity. To put it another way, differences are difficult and very few of us are either all bad or all good.

Today, many of the projects started back in the '70s no longer exist and the community now feels fragmented. We need to re-vision, re-inspire both the idea and the experience of Lesbian Community. It's time to heal and move forward again.

I suggest we consider the following challenges:

Dealing With Differences

"Differences must be not merely tolerated," Audre Lordé says, "but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths — acknowledged and equal — can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged."

Short Circuiting Lateral Hostility

Internalized powerlessness and passivity set us to picking on each other instead of confronting our real problems; and this we must interrupt when we see it happening.

Supporting Our Successes

Internalized sexism has taught us to undermine, resent, or demand perfection from female achievers and leaders. When an individual or group is willing to take risks, to go out on a limb, we must make sure that the women following behind aren't carrying a saw.

Linking the Generations

A community that doesn't recycle the experience and understanding of its oldest

members or educate its youngest is seriously impoverished. Feeling connected to the generations ahead and behind posits us firmly in history and imparts a profoundness to the idea of lesbian community. It implies a debt to the older generation that is to be paid off by responsibility to the younger one. We need to be in touch with both ends of the age spectrum if we are to truly understand how we got here or where we might be going.

Commitment

Lesbian community is not a consumer item or a cafeteria of happenings. It is a web of relationships extending over time. Our organizations, newspapers, teams, bars, theatres, and stores, etc., are the structure of these relationships. Without structure, relationships tend to dissipate. These structures need active and tangible support. Share a portion of your resources, time, or talents by writing a check, volunteering, or consulting. And do it regularly.

Developing lesbian identity and community are creative projects larger than our lifetimes. With varying degrees of intent we are all part of the process, part of the web. Diverse and evolving, partially shaped by economics and political forces beyond our control, we will, nonetheless, become what we make of ourselves.

News from CAP

by W.C. McRae

"AIDS is an emotional issue," says Mike McGowan, Board of Cascade AIDS Project Chairperson, "and AIDS organizations attract emotional people."

Emotions have indeed been running high at CAP. On August 24, the CAP board voted to replace Executive Director Brown McDonald with Tom Koberstein. The move was greeted with surprise by many, and with a great gush of rumor by those who do not always follow the sometimes wayward course of the organizations that have emerged in Portland in response to AIDS.

Why did McDonald have to go? The situation that led to McDonald's dismissal as executive director of CAP is historical, and points, at one level, to differences in administrative focus between partisans of two organizations, CAP and CHES (Community Health Essential Support Services). At the same time, however, and at a higher level, the conflicts reflect a collision of mainstream gay politics with the dynamics of AIDS activism.

Beginnings

Under Director Reese House, CAP began as a committee within Phoenix Rising. The early CAP organization undertook the responsibility of providing both education and services. Somewhat later, CHES (later CHES), initially a subcommittee of CAP, sought to improve support services for PWAs and PWARCs by founding the PAL project, which is patterned after San Francisco's Shanti Project. The Brinker Fund, named for the late Chester Brinker, an Empress of the Rose Court, provided direct monetary support, and was a response to the financial devastation that often accompanies AIDS.

As CAP and CHES (merged early on with the Brinker Fund) became independent and evolved, the differences of their emphases, education vs. support services, came to be personified by their respective boards.

Administrative assistant Leslie Waygren observes, the split between the organizations followed an objective/subjective philosophical dichotomy: CAP, as the educational arm, attracted factual, nuts and bolts types, dynamic common-sensical, and objective; CHES, dealing with direct support to PWAs, attracted board members who were sensi-

tive, caring, emotive, "touchy-feely," subjective. According to Waygren, these were also dichotomies — and boards — that spanned new politics vs. old politics, conservatives vs. liberals. The board of directors that make up CHES have included figures from the Court system, Parents/FLAG, and people with ties to mainstream politics. The CAP board has been largely made up by newcomers to politics and activism — outsiders: unknown and untried quantities.

These realities led to different dynamics and priorities within the boards.

Prior to the merger and directly after it, CAP and CHES were reduced to sharing one office — CAP on the one side, CHES on the other, with the no-man's-land of the volunteers in between. Hostilities were legion. CHES had an administrator, an assistant administrator, and two part-time service coordinators. CAP had an executive director and an educational program director. The organizations shared one volunteer office manager. Add CAP's 8 member board and CHES's 15-member board, a phalanx of volunteers and PWAs, and you have a situation endemic to antagonism.

Money

And through it all, funding was ever an issue. About a year ago, big money started coming to CAP and CHES. And with it, a new visibility. CAP won two \$19,000 grants from the National Conference of Mayors, and \$47,000 from the State Health Division. CHES received \$30,000 from Multnomah County. City Nights Group, a self-acknowledged "bunch of guys who like to throw parties," formed to hold dance parties as major fundraisers for Portland AIDS organizations. However, not everyone viewed their purpose so altruistically. "It was the old boys network trying to control what happened with AIDS by controlling the purse strings," asserts a former CAP staff member who chooses to remain anonymous.

City Nights' first benefit with Sylvester enabled them to donate \$8,000; the second dance party with Pamela Stanley raised \$800; and a third benefit in late August with Claudja Barry plunged its organizers into four-digit debts.

City Nights, through economic clout, political ties, and alliances with CHES, was able early this summer to enter into discussions with CAP to become a fourth arm of the organization to do fundraising. The consoli-

dation has been tentatively postponed due to consideration of CAP's not-for-profit status.

Power

Under conditions determined by CAP's board, CAP and CHES voted to merge early this spring, partially to shore up CHES financially, and to unify Portland's response to the health crisis. And to end the confusion (CHES? CHES? CHES/PAL? Old CAP? New CAP? Super CAP? Or perhaps CAN? [Cascade AIDS Network?])

In the process, "The fish that ate the fish, got ate," (Waygren). Under the terms of merger, the CHES board of directors was cut from 15 to 8, to match the number on CAP's board. The new 16 person board kept CAP's name. But who would staff the new organization? According to Steve Fulmer (member of the original CHES board), the CAP and CHES senior staff "was at each other's throats." CHES administrator Farley Peterson was discreetly fired, leaving Brown McDonald as the natural choice for interim director of the new CAP. However, as a condition of merger, the CHES board insisted that a nation-wide search for executive director be conducted.

According to Terry Wright, present CAP board member and head of the personnel committee, the search committee received 80 resumes. From this number 7 preliminary candidates were selected. Two candidates were subsequently recommended to the board without bias.

On August 24, the board voted 8-7 to name Tom Koberstein as CAP executive director. The vote split along CAP/CHES party lines. The sixteenth and absent voter was a CAP board member, who now resides in San Francisco, and was not present. In the fracas that followed, three board members announced their intention to resign (two were later re-instated).

Brown McDonald says, "The board's decision wasn't based on anyone's merit. Accomplishments didn't have anything to do with it."

Fulmer says, minimalistically, that the board was "bilateral," adding that the decision was based on who could best lead a new organization.

Chief among the reasons given to replace McDonald was his bad relations with the Imperial Court system, City Nights Group, and the Right to Privacy PAC. These bastions of gay politics found McDonald's personal style "combative." Said one insider, "When they

wanted to help, they got hostility."

McDonald, in turn, claims that these organizations were threatened by CAP because they couldn't control it. "The question here," says McDonald, "is who's pulling strings and why. Certain selected people are allowed to pull strings. They do now, and they will later."

McDonald was particularly censured for not getting along with the City Nights fundraisers. McDonald responds to this criticism by asserting that he was able to raise \$17,000 with his Bike-for-Life fundraiser.

Also, because of alleged inefficiency and confusion in the CAP office, McDonald had the reputation of being difficult to deal with, and of being hostile to any but his own directions. He was also accused of not being a "people person," and not good at networking. "He's a prima donna," said one observer. Others accused him of taking a narrowly defined task — educating about AIDS — and turning it into an enormous bureaucracy.

"CAP represented a different kind of organization," claims McDonald. "It was grassroots, process-oriented, and staffed by volunteers who were there in response to AIDS. CAP was fueled by concern, not ambition," he says.

McDonald's supporters on the board claimed that it was the wrong time to change administration. One board member claimed, "You don't change leaders during a time of change." "If McDonald is replaced, the organization would be set back a year," some asserted. Others dismiss the allegations that the vote reflected ill feelings toward McDonald, and assert that Koberstein was simply the best person for the job.

McDonald feels the board ignored his accomplishments. "It was politics, not merit," he says, that removed him from his position.

So why did McDonald have to go? Many cite office politics and long-time intransigence and mistrust between board members of CAP and CHES. Others say it was a hatchet job by political insiders.

Leslie Waygren captured the sense of inevitability: "Part of the buy-out with merging was that Brown had to go."

McDonald carried with him the weight of the collective history — the frustrations and the expectations — of Portland's response to AIDS.

A new beginning. We wish Cascade AIDS Project, Tom Koberstein, and CAP supporters the integrity of their New Attitudes.