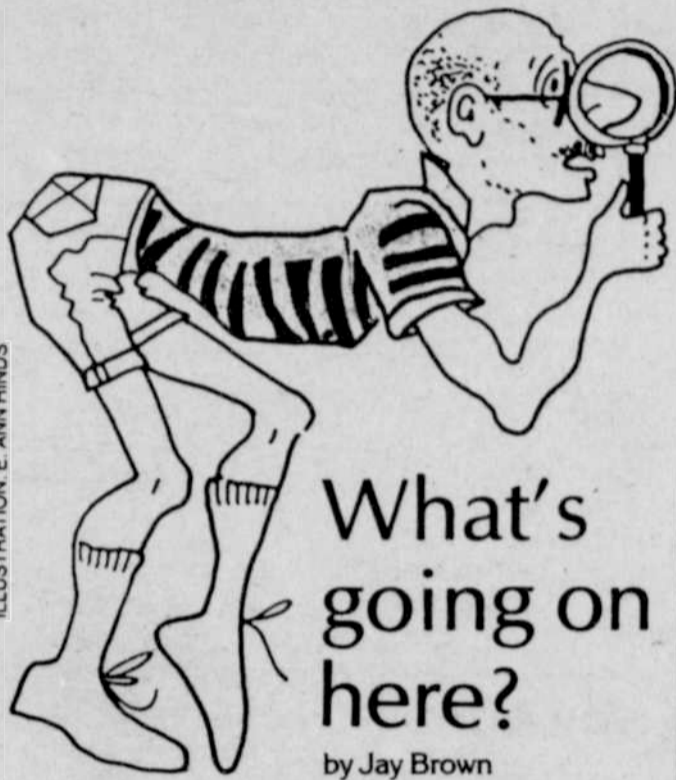


Rap on homophobia

Our community played host, late last month, to a wonderful bunch of "Evangelists." Well, not *really* evangelists, but people certainly able to use evangelistic tactics to achieve their goals.

The group, delegates and others participating in the Fifth International Convention of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, met for a weekend at Portland's Westin Benson Hotel. The theme of the convention, "R.A.P. on Homophobia: A Search for Understanding (*Religion, AIDS, Politics)," took me on a wonderful journey.



What's going on here?

by Jay Brown

We came, 250 of us, from all over the US — from Connecticut to California, from Texas to Minnesota. And some of us came from Canada.

We met and talked in a variety of sessions and workshops. We heard Gary MacDonald, Executive Director of the AIDS Action Council (Washington, D.C.) announce that AZT will soon be released to qualifying PWAs.

We heard young Rev. Christopher Johnson say of his fellow Catholic, the recently muzzled Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen, "His only crime is living the Bible."

We heard the Rev. Eldon Olson declare, "You've got to come out because then you permit others to come out."

A Family Affair

For many years I have had no personal contact with anyone in my nuclear family (parents and siblings) and for more than two years there has been no communication between us at all. About ten years ago I pushed too far and my mother said, "I will never accept it as long as you live," firmly slamming the closet door.

After living without traditional family ties for so long, and aware of many people who are also alienated from their families, I had lost all sense that "family" really exists for lesbians and gays. I could not have been more in error, because during the weekend I learned that there is a great network of family laboring not

only for liberation from oppression for lesbians and gays but also for our affirmation.

What follows is an impressionist view. I questioned; and I listened with an ear for "family."

The questions I asked most frequently focused on local school boards, e.g., "Are there any gay-supportive people on your school board?" I believe that affirmative information can be disseminated through the public school system and eliminate the need for re-education.

Gay and gay-supportive people have yet to aggressively tap this source and use public education to eradicate homophobia. One person actually said, "We can't use public funds, ..." apparently unaware that she is the public whose funds are being used to perpetuate ignorance and fear.

Two people found my school board question impertinent and told me in no uncertain terms, "We are doing quite well in our churches, thank you very much." Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays are, in fact, intensifying outreach through organized religious bodies and are including it in their national agenda.

Using organized religion to combat homophobia is appropriate, certainly, but it need not be the only avenue pursued. For instance, the US Supreme Court recently affirmed that 24 states in this country may prosecute gay people for making love. Those states need new laws, and laws are made by legislative bodies.

Workshop: Homophobia in the high school

Only one person of the fifty who participated in this workshop had been a member of a local school board; but at the time she served she did not know that her son was gay. She also remarked that she had very little knowledge about homosexuality at the time.

A dimly small number of hands were raised when someone asked, "How many parents knew their children were gay or lesbian while they were in high school?" The former school board member said, "Many years later, my son told me, 'If only one person had told me it was okay to be gay.'"

An activist from Houston, Texas, Freda Jerrell, told about her experience with getting affirmative gay/lesbian information into the local public schools. When asked, "How did you do it?" Ms. Jerrell clenched her fist, raised her arm and replied, "I just bullied my way through."

Workshop: Substance abuse in the gay/lesbian community

"Addiction is very much a family disease," and in many cases grows out of the family situation: addicts begetting addicts.

Chemical dependency, which includes drugs of all types, whether obtained by prescription, on the black market or at the local alcohol dispensary, affects one in three people in the population. Addiction covers all areas of peoples' lives.

Particularly pervasive in the gay/lesbian community, chemical and alcohol addiction, especially when combined with internalized homophobia, is seen as a primary co-factor

in debilitation and premature death.

Substance abuse continues to be implicated in immune system dysfunction.

AIDS

Looking about at the assemblage listening to Gary MacDonald explode the myth that "AIDS has nothing to do with the family" confirmed for me that family is an integral part of the battle, not only against AIDS, but against homophobia itself. MacDonald reminded us that we must work together in exerting pressure on government agencies and make sure that everything possible is being done in research and education.

"Knowledge about AIDS is the best prevention," Tom Koberstein, newly-appointed director of Oregon's Cascade AIDS Project, declared as he urged us to examine our own lingering homophobia. Addressing homophobia in the religious establishment, Koberstein asked, "Why are the voices of Hollywood stars heard louder than church leaders?"

Politics

At luncheon on Saturday, Barbara Roberts, Oregon's dynamic Secretary of State told us, "One person *can* make a difference," as if in echo of Freda Jerrell's assertiveness. Roberts recounted the story of the journey which took her from being a single mother raising two children (one autistic) to the Office of Secretary of State.

"I have learned that the experts don't have all the answers," Roberts said. She learned that just one person can make changes if he or she is willing to take a firm stand.

"There must never be another season of silence," Roberts declared as she acknowledged a standing ovation for her provocative and inspirational speech.

Keeton Lowery: "The more Pat Robertson talks, the more I am convinced that we *do* have a serious drug problem in this country."

Gary MacDonald: "We must confront public officials with their homophobia."

Dick Springer: "If you have an issue, you must be political; but do *not* assume that a political candidate or legislator has any understanding of your issue."

Nancy Ryles: "It got so that it wasn't enough to be concerned about racism and sexism, I found that we must also be concerned about discrimination based on sexual orientation."

Rev. Eldon Olson: "The issue is human liberation. There is no basis for the other side."

At the session on religion on Sunday morning, Rev. Christopher Johnson said, as if to illustrate hypocrisy in religious establishments, "It's okay to be, but it's not okay to do." Rev. Johnson's statement clarified for me the note I jotted down during Martin Weinberg's speech at the awards banquet the previous evening. My note reads: "There is no choice in sexual feelings but there may be choice in sexual behavior."

Martin Weinberg, the author of *Development of Sexual Orientation*, is a researcher expanding on the work begun by Dr. Alfred Kinsey whose pioneering studies acknowledged that sexuality is biologically limitless. Weinberg, a sociologist and co-author of

Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity Among Men and Women, reminds us of the ways in which the scientific community has aided and abetted homophobic oppression.

But how does the information which Dr. Weinberg's research provides make changes when, as he said in answering a question from the floor, public funds formerly available for the kind of research he does have been totally eliminated? If there is no public money for research there will certainly be no money for education.

Religion

I must admit that as an atheist I had no little trouble swallowing the many justifications for circumventing religious teaching presented by the panel of religionists, but I am certainly heartened to know that we have such eloquent and learned comrades in the struggle for liberation.

In my family, when the children entered public school they were also sent off to Sunday school at the local community church. My parents never went into a church except to attend funerals. We children were allowed to make up our own minds.

I was particularly lucky because very early in my life I heard the stories of the Greek myths and what I had first heard as stories I soon learned was really a religion. I was a prodigious reader and first read Edith Hamilton before I was 10 years old. (Hamilton was made an honorary Athenian in recognition of her Greek studies.)

So I came to believe that, like the Greeks and other so-called "pagans," Jews and Christians also created their gods in their own image.

In appreciation

The blindered mainstream media in Portland missed an opportunity to enlighten their audiences when they snubbed the Parents-FLAG convention. The programs, speakers, interchange, networking and enlightened attitudes are very much appreciated in this quarter.

I especially urge *Just Out's* readers to thank the Portland chapter of PFLAG for their wonderful convention program by contacting them at PO Box 230266, Portland, OR 97223, and by becoming involved. P/FLAG meets the fourth Wednesday of each month at the Justice Building, 1111 SW 2nd.



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