

Lighting candles in the dark

by Billy Russo

"In darkness broken only by candlelight, about 20 people gathered on the steps of the Douglas County Courthouse Sunday night to protest the California AIDS initiative and ask that gays and lesbians in California and Roseburg be given the right to love without government intervention."

— Greg Abbott
The News-Review
November 3, 1986

On the eve of election day Roseburg's daily paper covered Southern Oregon's first lesbian/gay demonstration. Both local television stations also showed footage on the evening news.

In his article Greg Abbott goes on to explain how the California initiative would affect individuals carrying, and/or suspected of carrying, the HIV virus.

He also documented the homophobic response that accompanied the candlelight vigil: "The vigil was quiet, the only interruption being a few people driving by shouting 'Get AIDS,' or obscenities. Some [vigil participants] joked that they were amazed people of that mentality could actually read the newspaper to know of the vigil." The demonstration had been announced in the community section of the paper a few days earlier.

I arrived at the courthouse a full hour before the vigil commenced. It was a cool, but clear, evening. Downtown Roseburg is usually peaceful on a Sunday night, and November 2 was no exception. Half a dozen faggots and dykes joined me in the first half hour. Then the TV crews arrived: first the PBS station and then the NBC affiliate.

By six-thirty 16 GALA members, two officers from the Umpqua River's NOW chapter, and two participants from the newly-formed AIDS Task Force joined the small assembly. And with candles, speeches and songs, we stood in protest for all to see.

In the days that followed the vigil some individuals suggested that I had hired local punks to drive by and scream obscenities. Well, it does sound like something that I would do; however, it isn't true. In fact, I was genuinely concerned that an overwhelming homophobic response would have done considerable damage: giving us the sense that we had failed, especially if the homophobia spilled over into the media coverage.

I well remember what happened to MCC in 1983 when the Roseburg congregation requested permission to use the chapel at the First United Methodist Church and was refused. The little MCC group had grown in leaps and bounds until that point. After the resounding defeat of that proposal, MCC Roseburg remained at a plateau for a while, and has since slowly declined.

The MCC scenario played over and over in my mind in the days preceding the vigil. I could easily imagine two or three "Joy Buses" arriving from the Seventh Day Adventist church, filled with sign-carrying, vicious people, extolling their hatred and drowning out our peaceful demonstration. The effect of such overwhelming homophobia would have been demoralizing, and the effect on our social service organization would be far-reaching.

Many closeted homophiles were watching us that evening. A negative event would have reinforced their fear of exposure. As it turned out the homophobic response was quite manageable and the press was all good. And it's no coincidence that at its general meeting the following week, GALA signed up six new members. Normally we don't sign up that many in a whole year.

EVERYONE IS TALKING ABOUT TEN PERCENT REVUE



Jon Arterton, Jenifer Firestone, Tom Wilson Weinberg, Helena Snow, and Elliot Pilshaw

... jubilant in its affirmation of gay and lesbian love, life and culture.

The Advocate

... totally captivating ... an entertaining, exciting and uplifting evening.

Bay Area Reporter

FIVE PERFORMANCES ONLY!!!!

Thursday, January 29, Sparkling opening, 8 p.m.

Friday, January 30, 8 p.m., Saturday, January 31, TWO SHOWS, 7 & 10 p.m.

Sunday, February 1, Limited Income Performance, 7 p.m.

Tickets (available December 15th) sliding scale — Thursday Sparking Opening, \$10-\$15.
Friday and Saturday performances \$7-\$10. Sunday Limited Income Performance \$5-\$10.

For more information call JUST OUT at 236-1252 or PHOENIX RISING, 223-8299.

Percent of proceeds benefits Phoenix Rising Foundation.