

The greatest feeling in the world is to walk in front of the entire world with your people, to stop traffic, to say for just one day a year, "I am not invisible and I will be heard."

BY MICHAEL S. REED

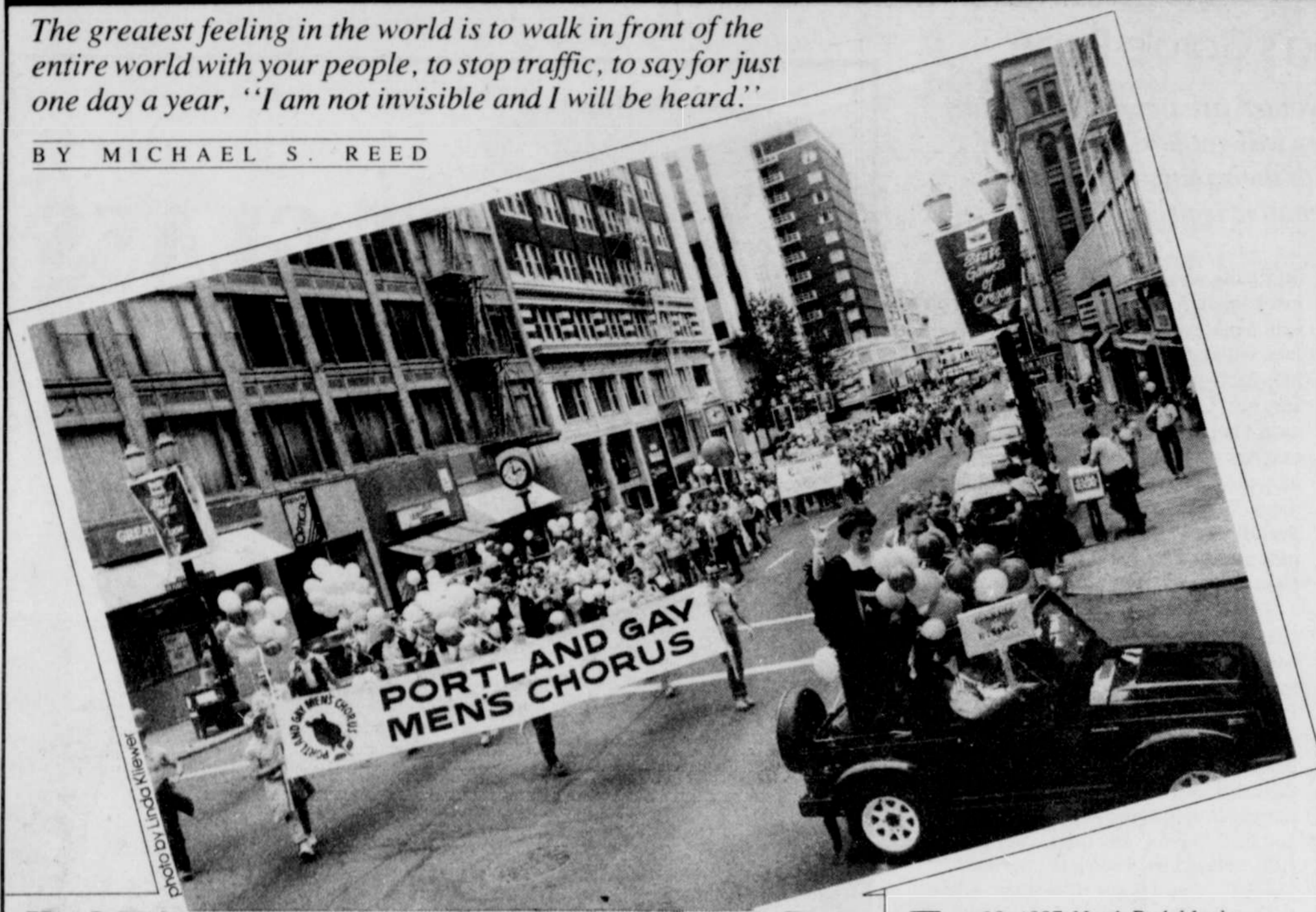


photo by Linda Kiewer



photo by Linda Kiewer



photo by Joy Brown

June 20, 1987. North Park blocks. 11:00 a.m. Thousands of brilliant blue, red, yellow, lavender (I should hope so) balloons given for the asking by folks carrying swooning bouquets of them.

A festive happy atmosphere filled with both familiar faces and the faces of strangers. Smiles exchanged far more than one ever sees in the boy bars. Lots and lots of women — thank them for their spirit and sense of activism which makes the community of gay people strong.

Step off. The parade begins. A red pickup truck bearing a man in a leather. Two aggressively dressed drags, one in leopard print skin tight body suit, the other in cartoon hair marching before the leatherman's chariot. Nice touch. Even more drags would be better — nothing to be ashamed of girls, get out your wigs, get cranked and get out there — without you we are lost. We need your anger, your humor, your apt sense of the outrageous and your strength, especially on this one day a year when we stop traffic, come out in the daylight hours and parade through the main streets as if we might actually belong here. Imagine the nerve of us!

Our lovely empress, Lady Elaine Peacock, was a glittering blue gem in a gown that offered tantalizing glimpses of a rather shapely derriere. Christopher wore leather and pearls. The cast of *Jerkers* trucked about in their sheets. The gay A.A. group made lots of noise (which was a continual, appropriate, and quite appreciated reminder — to those of us who are beginners at this sort of thing — that the objective of the parade is to be seen *and* heard). Joe and Bill walked hand in hand down Main Street, U.S.A., just like they were normal folks. Ben Merrill carried a N.O.W. sign like the spoils of war. Thank the blessed people on the sidelines that cheered us on and the grim faced policeman who was very businesslike in his job and another who was smiling like it was some good show, which it was. And best of all, it did not rain on our parade.

It did rain, however, for our rally. But that did not stop some of the tenacious dancers who wanted to celebrate and not let a little old harmless rain stop them (mostly women, too, after all, we gay boys do melt in the rain and it might muss our coiffure). And whoever had the sensible foresight to play "It's Raining Men" should be kissed a hundred times. A perfect song for the day, the rain, dancing on the bricks near the river in the open in front of the world.

Then the speeches: the unfortunate and rather rude reception that Portland gave to the gentlemen from Seattle. Hardly anyone listened to his speech about the March on Washington, (D.C.) Many of the women between the speaker and me were carrying on happy conversations while he spoke of why gay people might want to march on Washington, D.C. — the basic essence being that it might behoove us as an oppressed minority to protest injustice and inhumanity. Politics aside, however, it is unfortunate that Portland cannot show a little more manners in receiving out-of-town guest speakers. There were, however, a few responses in the crowd to his recitation of the reasons why there would be a protest demonstration in Washington, D.C. A few people responded to his call to end apartheid, but that was really the only topic that seemed to stir anyone's blood. It was almost as though the issues geared toward gay rights did not merit much interest or response. Seems ironic, somehow.

The gay hiking group had a rather enthusiastic response from the women in the community. Apparently the male members of the community were hesitant because the excursions might require too much physical effort, or they might have to rise from bed too early, or buy new boots and wardrobe. But the women are raring to go and apparently well versed in the art of hiking. Luckily there is a hiking group for lesbians that didn't have a booth. So the men took the women's names who were interested and plan to give those names to the lesbian group. There is, at present, talk of the two groups hiking together. That is comforting to know, especially in light of the usual gender-separatism that seems to continually divide gay people.

There were many of us there, but there must be more. If everyone who marched in the parade this year (the *Oregonian* reported 800-1000 people) called two more friends next year and arranged to go together, we'd make an even bigger impact. Incidentally, we received a very nice write up in the *Oregonian*, even if it was tucked in the back of the Metro section. I think if we had more color and more noise (something very splashy, please) we might someday rate a picture.

For those who have never marched in the parade you are missing the greatest feeling in the world: to walk in front of the entire world with your people, to stop traffic, to say for just one day a year, "I am not invisible and I will be heard — I will be the man or woman I want to be and nobody can tell me otherwise. And I will be proud of myself for being strong enough and brave enough to stand before you as I really am, and not just how you want me to be." It offers an opportunity to slam the closet door behind you and to know that you never have to go back again and stay in the dark, alone.