POWELL'S TRAVEL STORE

Travel Books Galore
gay guides too!

Maps for destinations
worldwide

Moneybelts
Passport carriers
Currency convertors
and other nifty things

Espresso and
the latest issue of
Just Out

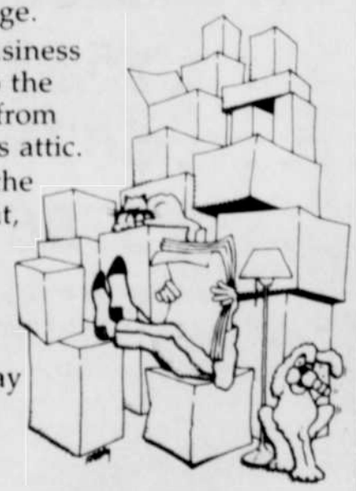
Pioneer Courthouse Square
Open 9-9 Mon-Sat, 11-6 Sun

A CURE
FOR URBAN
OVERCROWDING

When you've run out of places to put things, and the boxes are taking over, it's time to call Downtown Self Storage.

From business records to the treasures from Grandma's attic. We have the convenient, low cost solution to your problem.

Call today for a copy of our brochure "The Advantages of Downtown Self Storage".



Get one month free with a one year lease, paid in advance

DOWNTOWN
SELF STORAGE
N.W. 14th & Davis
Portland, Oregon 97209
241-4700

LCP: Community beyond commonality

"For LCP to exist, to function, it has to be more mainstream than extreme," says a board member. "It's not going to be all things for all lesbians — it never will be."

BY ANDEE HOCHMAN

Jesse Jordan took her first look at the twenty-four board members of the Lesbian Community Project and decided it would never work.

"We had a couple of lawyers and a CPA, a recovering drug addict, a 17-year-old, a 56-year-old, black women, Hispanic women — the most diverse group of people you could imagine being in one room. My first thought was: we're never going to decide on anything; we'll never get anything done."

Now, five months after that first board meeting, one year after Portland's first lesbian conference, LCP boasts more than 400 members. More than 150 make monthly pledges of up to $50. A bimonthly newsletter lists classes and dances, lectures and meetings.

And Jesse Jordan has changed her mind.

"The most powerful part of LCP . . . has been watching this group of women, who you would never think would be in the same room together, watching them support each other," she said. "I've learned that it is possible to work in a diverse group and get something done."

That image — of disparate voices finding common chords — surfaces again and again when board members try to explain the spirit of LCP. They talk about "unity through diversity," a phrase so simple and quick it could land on a bumpersticker. But beneath the cliché is a complicated truth that board members credit for LCP's progress: the recognition that "community" demands looking beyond what its members have in common.

Among the ranks of LCP's board — and its membership — are women of varied ages, races and interests. There are chefs and attorneys, students and social workers. There are women who've never attended a meeting and women who were there in the 1970s as Portland's lesbian community came together, and then fractured, along edges of differences that wouldn't disappear.

Women who remember those years say the lesbian community's code of behavior became too rigid, that the flip side of political fervor was arrogance and bitterness. The price of "pure" activism meant the other person always had to be dead wrong.

"Ten years ago, everyone was feeling much more intense about everything," said an LCP board member who did not want to be named. "I don't think people feel that same urgency . . . part of the problem ten years ago is we all felt that we were right. We just couldn't compromise because of that intensity . . . Ten years ago, if people disagreed, they both went away thinking the other one was a pig."

"Isms" of class, age and race became divisive, not educational. Slowly the economy receded and, with it, many lesbian activists withdrew into quieter, more private, lives.

•••

The line between Cathy Siemens's private life and LCP is sometimes hard to locate. The top floor of her house includes an alcove filled with overstuffed LCP files; her phone rings often, frequently with LCP business. She is embarrassed to tell the length of her workdays since she became LCP's only paid staff member more than a year ago.

Siemens says she is exhausted, but when she talks about LCP, enthusiasm nudges her forward in the chair.

"Here we were, in 1985, looking out at the lesbian community," she said. "Many of us who had been here in the early '70s noticed that it was very disorganized and very inactive. We sort of wondered where it all went. The lesbian community needed a shot in the arm."

Last November's conference, titled "Building Community: Common Ground for the Future," was part of the prescription. Shortly afterwards, an interim steering committee began to develop bylaws for LCP through a series of open meetings. A membership drive began in April and, in May, LCP held the first community-wide elections for leadership of a lesbian organization.

"The current effort is another turn on the spiral," said Siemens, who recently gained the title of LCP Executive Director. "I really sense that the time is right — people are ready to try it again."

•••

Katharine English wasn't sure she wanted to try again. "At first, I was very reluctant [to get involved in LCP] because I am sort of an oldtime dropout of the lesbian political movement," said English, now co-chair of the LCP board. "The work that I did before ended up being not particularly rewarding because we never seemed to move forward very far . . . It was the era of political correctness — there was a lot of internal judging of each other . . . I began to expand a lot of my interests and become what others viewed as more middle-class, more mainline. I felt excluded by the lesbian community because of what was viewed as my changing politics.

"But I really liked the feeling of the conference . . . I sensed a different environment, an attitude in the community, and thought maybe the time was right to try again to set up a broad-based lesbian organization."

Some LCP members say it was politics that pushed them back into the fray. For others, it was fear — concern that the "New Right" was gaining influence and momentum enough to erase civil liberties achieved in the last two decades.

"It's really important that not only as lesbians, but as women, that we organize politically," said Teresa Enrico, a member of the LCP board. "There's a lot of hopelessness and powerlessness — the feeling that it's just too big out there."

For others, the conference was the spur; the presence of hundreds of lesbians, the workshops, the discussions, the exchange of ideas made them believe "community" was something that could actually happen.

"I attended only the last part of the conference," said Juanita Lopez Baldwin, another board member. "I was really impressed because there were . . . over 100 women there. Prior to that, I had never put any energy into the women's community . . . I didn't think there *was* a lesbian community in Portland."

•••

The seasoned organizers say it's different this time around. Some of the changes are obvious; for instance, the board doesn't demand consensus — if discussion of an issue doesn't yield agreement, they eventually vote. ("Shocking!" jokes English.) Women show up at meetings in Birkenstocks and spike heels, dresses and Levi's.

Other differences run deeper. From its first days, LCP took steps to achieve economic and ethnic diversity among its leadership and membership. A low-income membership fee of $10 is available in addition to the regular fee of $20, and a scholarship fund can help foot the bill for women who can't afford to pay. Six of the 24 board positions were designated for women of color (who also could run for at-large positions). A standing committee has the task of outreach to minority communities and the Women of Color Potluck Group, actively linked to LCP, holds monthly gatherings.

Women of color on the board say those efforts reflect a difference in sensitivity about racism. "I don't see the same need to have fits about things as I did [ten years ago]," said one board member. "Sure, racism still exists, but it's not as much of a problem as it was then . . . I don't know about the other women of color, but I don't feel like I need to be screaming a lot."

"The best part of the experience, for me, has been working with women of color," said English. "Because, like all liberals, I've always mouthed everything proper, but I never was able to put it to the test. I am enlarged by the contributions of the women of color — I learn so much about ways to look at things. I'm a pretty self-righteous person. I never realized I had so much more to learn."

The bottom line, both within and outside the community, said Enrico, is that now "we can be more of who we are, whatever that means."

•••

For some LCP leaders and members, it means being partly — or fully — closeted, a need that might have drawn derision ten years ago.

"A really important thing for women to understand about LCP is that you can choose how much you want to be involved, and you can choose how public you want to be," said a board member who did not want to be named. "It's not like ten years ago, when, if you came to one meeting — boom, that was it. . . . Today you don't have to jump out there in your lavender suit.

"[Previously] it wouldn't even have occurred to me to participate" at the leadership level of a lesbian organization and expect to remain anonymous, she said. "Today I don't feel guilty about it. I'm out here at work, and I'm out in lots of places, but it's sometimes a risk to be out in my field. There's some value in people not knowing I'm a lesbian everywhere I go . . . it's a good chance to do some consciousness-raising."

"People get very judgmental about, 'Oh, so-and-so's not willing to be out,' " said Siemens. "It's easy for people to say that when they don't have children or aren't in jobs where it's prohibitive, like teaching. The thing about LCP is that they can have the best of both worlds: an organization that is very out, which can also protect individual anonymity."

Although some LCP board members believe all lesbians should "come out" to help end stereotyping and discrimination, tolerance and moderation prevail in LCP's official stance on the issue. The message is clear, printed on the glossy lavender-and-cream-colored brochure: "Because we are part of a society with profound homophobic prejudices, we respect every individual's need for discretion and confidentiality regarding her participation in LCP."

Despite the caveat, many women recoil from involvement in LCP — and members say reaching that group is their most delicate challenge. It means overcoming homophobia enfolded deeply into the lives of those it most affects; it means vaulting fears that keep women isolated and closeted; it means creative ways of bringing information to someone who will not attend a meeting or sign her name to a mailing list.

Ask how homophobia affects LCP, and Siemens claps a hand to her forehead in frustra-