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Just news

QUAC splits amid charges of bigotry, separatism

"My best and closest friend — a straight woman I've lived with for 10 years — was being discriminated against by QUAC's policy"

— Fred Menard

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

The group that began as Queers United Against Closets is now divided, its membership split by an emotional — and occasionally hostile — struggle over the organization's purpose, breadth and composition.

QUAC started in June, conceived out of the political urgency and anger ignited in many gay men and lesbians by the Oregon Citizens Alliance's "No Special Rights" petitions. Shortly afterward, *The Oregonian* published David Reinhard's homophobic column, and Transit Ads Inc. ordered the "We can live. Together." posters yanked from 15 Tri-Met buses. Those events only nurtured QUAC's momentum, and by July 14, more than 150 people came to chant in a QUAC-sponsored demonstration at *The Oregonian*.

But at weekly meetings, the core of energy and anger that was QUAC began to split. Now two distinct groups (one still calls itself QUAC; the other has yet to choose a name), they seem like a pair of warring fraternal twins, related in some essential way yet divided in outlook, personality and method.

The disagreement pivots on two basic questions: what should the group do, and who should take part. The group presently called QUAC confines its actions to specifically gay and lesbian issues. Its statement of purpose describes the organization as "a citizens action committee and anti-defamation league dedicated to the eradication of homophobia." And it limits voting membership to lesbians and gay men.

The mission statement of the other group begins in almost the same manner: the group is "a non-partisan citizens action group dedicated to the eradication of homophobia." Then it goes on to outline the group's wider scope: "We also support the fight against racism, sexism, ageism and discrimination against the disabled. QUAC welcomes the full participation of all people. . . . We realize that none of us will be free until we are all free."

In pursuit of these differing visions, members of the original group have accused each other of practicing bigotry, thus diffusing energy and wasting time. And both groups suffer the loss of original members who rejected this particular brand of high-drama politics and now are working with other groups, alone or not at all.

Members of the present QUAC say the group was founded for a specific, single purpose.

"I wanted to be in a gay and lesbian group. I have limited time and wanted to devote my time to a group run exclusively by gays and lesbians with nothing but gay and lesbian issues as its focus," said Stewart Jolliffe, one of QUAC's founders.

"I joined QUAC because it was queer," said Pat Bates. "And I feel the voting membership ought to be limited to queers — who better knows the kind of oppression we're under?"

Members of the other group maintain that the only way to counter homophobia is to capture the energy of other people who are oppressed, creating links between ongoing human struggles and gathering allies to fight Measure 8.

At an August 19 rally sponsored by the unnamed group, posters and signs indicated the

broad, bridge-building outlook of its members. "Unite to fight the Right," said one; another urged people to "Support Immigrant Rights: Stop AIDS Testing"; yet another called to "Stop Union Busting."

Adrienne Weller said she found QUAC's statement of purpose "gay-chauvinist and gay-separatist. We think the movements should be linked to each other, that we should be supporting each other." With a vote coming up on November 8, she said, political expediency is as crucial as ideology. "The most important thing is — we'll lose. This was started as an activist group to fight the right wing. That's why I came. Why should people stand by and let this gay-chauvinist philosophy lead us to defeat?"

For other members of the original QUAC, the more narrow statements about purpose and membership rang sour for personal reasons.

"My best and closest friend — a straight woman I've lived with for 10 years — was being discriminated against by QUAC's policy," said Fred Menard, who now attends weekly meetings of the unnamed group.

To many, the verbal battling carries echoes 15 years old — when the gay and lesbian community, taking its first tentative, angry steps out of many closets, wrestled to define itself. In the process, it created rigid lines of political "correctness" that were as divisive as they were precious. Fifteen years later, some of those divisions haven't healed.

"Some old luggage was brought with people," said Menard. "I haven't been real proud of the community."

Many members of the original QUAC ended up choosing one side of the split; a few seesaw between both groups' activities. And others simply left, opting to wage their political battles by themselves.

Carol Steinel, a member of the original QUAC, wrote a letter to the group in which she urged it not to exclude non-gay members.

"We have to draw in everyone we can. We have to illustrate the link between our community and the larger community, or we will never win our struggle," she wrote. "We must demonstrate acceptance or we will never obtain it."

Then she stopped coming to meetings. Instead, she has been writing letters to friends and family members about Measure 8, talking to non-gay acquaintances and finding creative ways to enlist support.

"I did an issue-trade with a friend of mine," Steinel said. "She's really worked up about the 'greenhouse effect.' I said, 'Write to your congressman about the gay issue and I'll write to mine about the environment.' We've got to make inroads with people we've never involved before."

People on both sides of the ideological crevice said they wish the other group well, plan to support its activities and hope the split will not drain energy from the immediate issue on both groups' agendas: defeating Measure 8.

"I hope the misunderstanding will die down," said Amanda Colorado, a member of the current QUAC. "I think the more groups there are to deal with this, the better. More power to all of us."