

Just news

Prison riot raises questions of homophobia, discrimination

On Halloween night, homosexual inmates seized control of two housing units at the Oregon State Correctional Institution (OCI), in what Corrections Department Director Michael Franke dismissed as a "spontaneous incident, perhaps triggered by the date."

The inmates, allegedly frustrated by homosexual discrimination, demanded: "1) — Equal rights for us [homosexuals] in housing as in the rest of the institution; 2) — Our choice of living conditions; 3) — Nobody will be punished in Units 1 and 2 for actions we have taken; 4) — All promises must come from Mike Franke and Governor Neil Goldschmidt; 5) — Medical attention for those needing it, Carlos needs medical attention. He asked and was refused; 6) — More paying jobs for homosexuals in institution; 7) — All harassment [sic] of homosexuals ceased [sic]."

According to Robbi Eldridge, Oregon State Corrections Department spokesman, the demands are not being considered by prison officials.

"This is a paper submitted to us," Eldridge said. "We in this system do not give these demands any kind of attention. We have an established grievance procedure — this is not it."

According to prison officials, no homosexuals had filed any complaints before the disturbance. "Honestly, we really don't know why the incident started," Eldridge said.

"Obviously overcrowding was a big factor."

The prison, designed to accommodate 476 inmates, housed 1,065 inmates on the date of the uprising. In fact, the 36 inmates involved in the disturbance were housed in dayrooms which were converted to alleviate overcrowding. But Michael Franke denied that overcrowding played any factor in the uprising.

"It would be the wildest conjecture to say it [overcrowding] had any role."

It would be a mistake to assume all the rioting inmates were homosexual, Eldridge said. He points to a letter prison officials received during the disturbance which stated that not all inmates supported the actions of the rioters. However, Eldridge does admit that OCI often segregates prisoners.

"The state has a responsibility to protect inmates who are vulnerable from predatory inmates. This fact of life does impact our response to the treatment of some inmates. But recently, we have had no obvious increase in the number of complaints from any inmate group," Eldridge said.

"Hogwash!" cries *Just Out* reporter Harold Moore. Moore is active in the Oregon prison movement. "What we have here is the same old argument used by prison officials to justify special treatment of gay inmates. What the OCI response on Halloween night said was 'We'll treat you any way we want. And you won't complain because, after all, we're here to protect you.' In that response lies the long term, institutionalized homophobia." That homophobia defines the correctional response to homosexuality and, indeed, the very essence of the complaints registered by the inmates of Units 1 and 2," Moore said.

The rioting inmates cannot speak to the media until prison disciplinary action is completed.

— K.C. de Gutes

Gay Hotline in dire straits, may close soon

For more than 15 years, the Counseling Center for Sexual Minorities (CCSM) — "The Gay Hotline" — has provided information, referrals and counseling service to the gay and lesbian (and bisexual and transvestite and . . .) community of Portland and the surrounding areas.

With as many as 10 calls per evening, volunteer operators answer calls that range from a simple, "I'm new in town, where's the bars" to a much more complex, "My lover just beat me up again . . . I can't handle this any more . . . what am I gonna do?"

The volunteers who answer these and the many other caller questions are trained listeners. Before becoming hotline counselors, each person must complete training designed to provide them with basic skills for listening and responding to the wide range of caller concerns, as well as becoming familiar with the hotline's resource directory.

All CCSM members, counselors, and board members alike, are volunteers who give time and money out of a belief that they provide a service and that they can help *their* community to be a better and healthier place.

Now, after more than 15 years CCSM may have met its maker. Financial and volunteer support for the hotline has come from many different sources over the years, but now has dropped to a core group of dedicated volunteers and benefactors who have kept the line running through their own efforts and mostly with their own funds.



On October 11, 1988 the financial reserves of CCSM gave out and the hotline was "temporarily" shut off by the telephone company. Overdue bills have, at this point, overcome the members' and benefactors' ability to meet the need.

The direct value of CCSM may seem fairly small to some. For example, many gay and lesbian businesses, especially the local bars, may not see themselves as being much impacted by CCSM (or its demise). Even though many CCSM calls are for "where are the bars," the fact is that most patrons will find the bars without CCSM.

But the callers in need of other forms of help and those in crisis won't necessarily find their answers at the bars. Nor will they always find an understanding and open listener through other counseling/hotline resources — which have usually referred such callers to CCSM for help — until now.

There will be a meeting at 7:30 pm on December 14, 1988. This meeting is open to all community members, businesses, and organizations interested in helping CCSM reopen its service to the community. Please call Kathy at 232-3276 for meeting location.

— Brian Gorrin

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