

Watching our backs in 1989

The skinheads have a Nazi agenda which endangers everyone who is not lily white, heterosexual and bald

BY MICHAEL S. REED

One evening, a few weeks ago, Teddy, Dusty and I were at a downtown hotel for cocktails. Two businessmen sat at a table near ours. As we talked, we kept hearing one of these men peppering his slightly drunken speeches with the word "faggots." At first it



was annoying, then offensive, then finally intolerable. Teddy finally spoke up, saying, "What's wrong with faggots?"

The man who loved wrapping his lips around the word turned his sharp nose and beady eyes toward Teddy and said, "This is a private conversation and none of your business."

"If it's a private conversation then why don't you keep it that way," Teddy retorted.

We attempted to return to our conversation while the rodent continued to be a jerk. Now that he knew we could hear him, he pressed on with his homophobic diatribe to get a rise out of us.

After awhile, I left the room for a moment. When I came back, Dusty was saying to Teddy, quite loudly, "C'mon, Teddy, don't argue with them. Those breeders aren't worth it."

Dusty went on to say it was odd how "they" always needed to put down others in order to feel superior.

The rodent man took umbrage at being referred to as "they" and fired a question at Dusty, "What do you mean 'they'?"

Dusty levelled an icy stare at the rodent man and said, "Excuse me, but this is a private conversation and none of your business."

The three of us then started speaking in whispers, laughing at them. This upset them. Apparently, bigots don't like being laughed at.

The rodent man picked up a chair and threatened to throw it at us. Dusty stared evenly at the rodent man and said, "Put that down, big boy, you're not man enough to use it."

The rodent man spluttered for a while, put the chair down and, a few moments later, left with his friend.

While shopping at Stadium Fred Meyer one evening, I saw a skinhead walking through the store. He was simply dressed in military issue khaki pants and black shoes. He wore a jean jacket, painted with unintelligible, scrawling words.

As he passed me, our eyes met. His were wide, intense and when I looked into them it was like looking into a cauldron bubbling with a very dark hatred.

I have been on many forms of public transportation in many cities across this country and I have seen my share of crazies. I'm not unaware of their presence. Usually, I just make mental notes for future character studies and go about my day. It is rare when someone on the street stays as clearly in my mind as this skinhead has.

For one thing, when our eyes met, I felt like one very vulnerable queer. I found myself instantly on his level. I, too, was afraid of another human being simply because of how he looked. Or, more simply put, how he wore his hair. Now I have seen many frightening hairstyles in my journeys, but this man's bald head has terrifying implications. The skinheads have a Nazi agenda which endangers everyone who is not lily white, heterosexual and bald.

I was angry that the appearance of another human being could frighten me so much. I startled myself by wishing that all the other shoppers would descend on this man, bludgeoning his billiard ball head with their bottles of chardonnay, their tuna fish cans, their purses.

Then I remembered that it is those kind of irrational fears that drive the skinheads to destroy people who are different from them. It is behavior better suited for animals than human beings. And while I do not want to be like these thugs, I do not want to be afraid, either. And I am afraid of them. I'm afraid for my personal safety and the safety of my friends when we're out on the street. I'm afraid of their similarity to the thugs that became Hitler's powerful army of stormtroopers. But, friends insist that Nazis could never have the power in America that they had in Germany. It won't happen here, I'm reminded again and again. Americans wouldn't stand for it, Americans wouldn't let it happen.

Then I wonder if the valiant Americans protecting minorities in this country from this

virulent fascism would be the same Americans that told us in Oregon that it is lawful to fire people from their jobs because they're queer.

To be fearful of bigots is unavoidable. To some extent, it is healthy to be afraid. The enemy must be feared, watched and studied. We must also laugh at them, since laughter deflates bullies quicker than any physical confrontation. We must also take them seriously enough to know that they can kill us and will kill us if they get the chance.

Now is the time to empower ourselves. If you've been thinking about taking a self-defense course, do it. If you go out at night, avoid walking the streets alone. If you do go out alone, watch and listen at all times. If you see two or more people coming toward you on a dimly lit street, don't walk there. Take another route. If you're walking in a deserted section of town, walk in the middle of the street instead of the sidewalk. It will give you more maneuvering room and make it harder for someone to jump you. If you find yourself in an area where you feel afraid, trust your instincts and get away from the area.

But don't let your fear get the better of you. Don't let it keep you inside your home and afraid to go out into the world. We must not become invisible simply because the number of thugs and homophobic violence is increasing in our city. My guess is that it's going to get worse before it gets better and hiding from the ugliness will not stop it from happening.

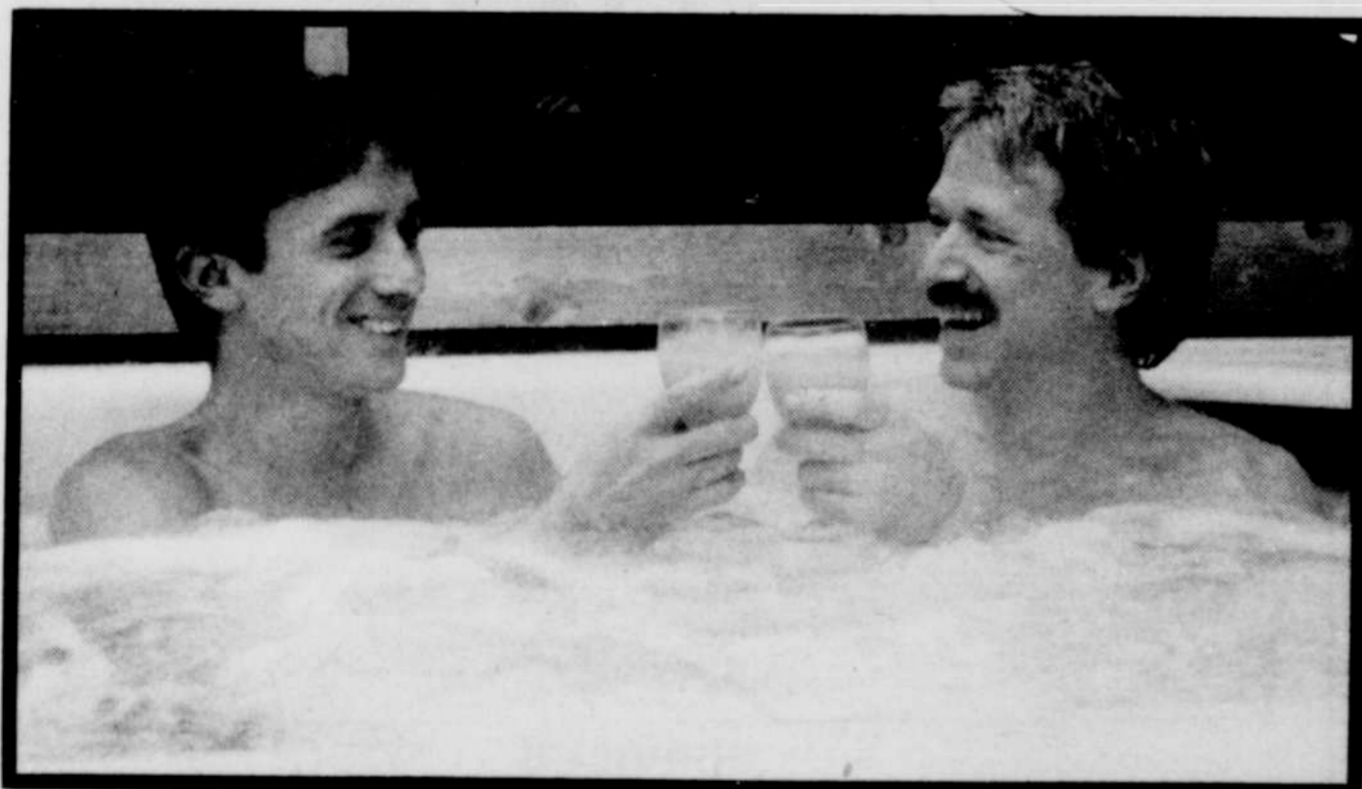
We will not be beaten down. We will remember what happened to homosexuals in Germany not so long ago. We shall stand upon our history as an oppressed people and we shall overcome the intolerance and hatred that plagues our country.

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