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Steppin' Out

PHOTO BY K. SANDWICK



Just news

Portlander heads psychiatric group

Dr. Peggy Hackenbruck elected president of the Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists at San Francisco convention

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Dr. Peggy Hackenbruck remembers marching with her colleagues down the streets of Washington, DC in October 1987, their professional banner waving overhead, and hearing a bystander's startled comment: "Wow, there are even gay and lesbian psychiatrists."

For years, the psychiatric community was loath to acknowledge homosexuality as normal and positive — in or out of its own ranks. Gay and lesbian psychiatrists often remained closeted rather than risk being blacklisted by colleagues. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the bible of mental health, listed homosexuality as a mental disorder.

That changed in 1973, when homosexuality was taken out of the book. And since then, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) has become more conscious, less homophobic and more willing to consider the needs of gay and lesbian psychiatrists, Hackenbruck said.

She recently became president of the Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists, a group separate from the APA which tries to educate the psychiatric community, support gay and lesbian practitioners and serve as a resource for questions. The group, which is about 10 years old, started "with gay psychiatrists — men, mostly — meeting one another clandestinely in gay bars during meetings of the APA. Men who are now in their 50s and 60s, who thought they were the only ones, and got up the nerve to say to the man next to them at the bar, 'I'm here for the APA.'"

"So it started as a social and support group." Since then, spurred by the 1973 change and the support of some heterosexual

psychiatrists, the group's focus has shifted to education, presenting panels and programs to the larger APA and publishing a journal of case studies.

"I think attitudes have changed dramatically," Hackenbruck said. "Especially within the official structure of the APA. We have gone from being given booth space [at APA conventions] in a far corner behind a pillar to being given booth space by the front door."

James Krajewski, a psychiatrist who served for six years as chair of the APA's committee on gay, lesbian and bisexual issues, agreed that the official stance, as well as the more subtle response to gay and lesbian psychiatrists, has changed.

"It's much easier to come out now. The leadership of the APA is very supportive of gay and lesbian issues these days," he said.

At the most recent APA convention held in San Francisco May 6-11, the program included discussions of homophobia, anti-gay violence and the training of gay psychiatrists by openly gay psychiatrists. Film offerings included the feature "Not All Parents Are Straight."

The most powerful educational tool, Hackenbruck said, is for gay and lesbian psychiatrists to come out — in their medical schools, to their colleagues, to their supervisors.

"We recognize that not all our members can be out. Some people do lose their jobs, or don't get promoted, so they have to stay closeted. But we now have young people who are out in their medical schools and residencies. We feel the people who are out make the biggest difference."

Because psychiatrists' attitudes about sexuality, as well as other matters, are heavily influenced in the classroom, the AGLP is now working on medical-school curricula that

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stress gay- and lesbian-positive teaching.

Another issue that is more difficult to tackle is the public perception of psychiatry, particularly in the gay and lesbian community, as being rigidly homophobic. Hackenbruck said that while the stance of psychiatrists toward gay and lesbian issues may be among the most liberal of the medical specialties, it still lags behind that of psychologists and social workers.

"I think word is gradually getting out that many psychiatrists are not homophobic," said Krajewski. "Or, at least, no more homophobic than everyone else."

Some of the changes in attitude are tangible. The APA has included "sexual orientation" in its non-discrimination clause since 1973, and local chapters signed on to endorse the "No on 8" campaign last November and the gay-rights bill, HB 2325, in 1987.

In the meantime, the AGLP continues to provide crucial support for gay and lesbian members, whether they are out or not. "I got involved because it was very important in my coming out," said Hackenbruck. "I needed that professional support."