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Lesbian addresses City Club

"I spoke to them as decision-makers, opinion-makers, as people we want in our corner. I know they were listening — they all stopped eating."

— Jean O'Leary

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Obtaining civil rights and coming out remain the critical issues for lesbians and gay men as we move into the "socially and politically conservative" 1990s, according to Jean O'Leary, executive director of the National Gay Rights Advocates, a national civil rights law firm which works toward gay equality.

O'Leary set a precedent July 21 by being the first openly gay person to address the Portland City Club. Her visit to Portland was part of the Lesbian Community Project's Margins to the Mainstream campaign, aimed to boost the visibility of lesbians.

O'Leary stressed in her speech, and in an interview afterwards, that civil rights and coming out must be part of a simultaneous two-fold push to end gay oppression. Many people are frightened to come out without legislation to protect them; at the same time, gays and lesbians must come out in order to demonstrate the need for such protections.

O'Leary organized last year's National Coming Out Day, with a theme that encouraged all lesbians and gay men to take the "next step" toward visibility.

"Coming out is a process," she said. "No one is ever entirely out of the closet — not even I am, sometimes. It's always possible to retreat a little bit. Probably 80 percent of gay people are not out on their jobs."

Partly because such a small percentage of gays are fully out, the public and the media have developed stereotyped images of gay men and lesbians, O'Leary said. "I do think there's been a heavy balance of slanting coverage by the media," she said. "When we have Gay Pride marches, they focus on the green fairy. And that's not our community; that's a part of our community....Anything we can do to promote the other images is helpful."

While civil rights constitutes the "big picture," O'Leary said, AIDS remains an urgent focus for the community. While the disease has prompted anti-homosexual backlash, she pointed out, it also has made "gay" a household word. "The immediate thing is that we need AIDS legislation," she said. "We're losing our leaders; we're losing our institutions; we're losing our history."

The National Gay Rights Advocates has been involved in AIDS-related cases ranging from underground drug trials to lawsuits concerning HIV testing. The organization also pursues employment discrimination cases and has begun an anti-violence project aimed specifically to counter the defense often used in murders of gay men that the accused "panicked when he made a pass at me."

"We pursue precedent-setting cases that will make an impact on the whole gay community," O'Leary said. "50 percent of our calls are about employment discrimination. We've also dealt with lesbian custody issues, AIDS, domestic partnerships, insurance, housing, immigration."

"Everybody has to have a roof over their head. So employment is your lifeline to survival. Family is your lifeline to love. Those seem to be the two areas where it's hardest to come out."

O'Leary herself came out in the late 1960s, after spending four and one-half years in a convent. "I'd read this article by an anonymous lesbian in Cosmopolitan magazine. Then I went to Yeshiva University in New York to get my doctorate in organizational development. But I was really looking for lesbians." She recalls walking through Greenwich Village with her father, asking him to walk ten feet behind her so he could "see if it was safe"; really, she was scouting for the women she'd heard frequented the area.

"I joined the Gay Activists Alliance. That was the year after Stonewall. I felt like I had come home. I just dove into the movement. I had a lot to lose — everything to lose. We've made a lot of changes and we have many, many more to go."

One way to press for change is through speeches to groups like the Portland City Club, O'Leary said. The audience remained hushed throughout her 35-minute speech and gave her a standing ovation when she was finished.

"I think what happened today was incredibly important," she said afterwards. "I spoke to them as decision-makers, opinion-makers, as people we want in our corner. When somebody comes in from the outside, people always listen more than when local people are saying the same thing. I know they were listening; they all stopped eating."

In her speech, O'Leary talked about the history of gay oppression; she stressed that gay men and lesbians "are everywhere" — in all professions, economic classes, and races. She mentioned the anti-intimidation bill that passed the Oregon legislature last month; it includes "sexual orientation" in the list of categories for which it is a crime to intimidate someone. "I talked about the hate crimes bill — that it's wonderful that this is the first time sexual orientation was introduced in a positive way into legislation. These two are the precursors to civil rights legislation. That's what our enemies have been saying, and they're right!"

As a veteran gay civil rights activist, O'Leary said she still finds reason to feel heartened about the ongoing struggle of lesbians and gay men. After National Coming Out Day last year, her office received 300 clippings about events held on that day, many of them from small towns. She sees progress in the localities that have passed gay-rights laws and in the efforts of the gay community to organize services for people with AIDS.

"We've come up from under," she said. "So everything we've done feels like a victory. Now our enemies are getting really vicious — virulent. They're really out to get us. I do think we'll rally. I'm optimistic. I've been optimistic all these 17 years." ▼

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