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One drag queen and eight nervous yet resolute dykes pitching one more battle for the dignity and equality promised in the United States Constitution

B Y L E E L Y N C H

I love a parade, always have. There's something in the rhythmic booming, the crowd's excitement, the mix of silliness and tacky sentimentality that gets to me. So when the Texas Femme called to ask if I knew anyone who might be willing to ride the gay float at the Fourth of July Parade in Ashland this year, I grabbed the chance.

I also got on the phone and called numerous women to drum up riders and parade-route supporters. I listened to qualms which echoed my own.

Would this one lose clients? That one risk tenure? Would their children be harassed? Would we be assaulted physically or verbally? Would there be fallout later? Would riding be courageous or foolhardy? How important was this holiday statement?

T H E



AMAZON TRAIL

Very important. Just one week after the parade William O'Connor, M.D., came to Southern Oregon. I have spoken with other physicians since. They claim Dr. O'Connor knows his facts and has some important information to share.

This may well be, but they also agree that the man is crazed with — who knows what to call it? Fear? Lunacy? Hate? Denial? Did he come to town to speak about HIV disease, or to work the citizens to hysteria? He supports a local initiative to declare the county in which I live an AIDS-Free Zone. Chills run down my back as I write the words.

The theme of this year's parade was about the specific freedom to be oneself. Certainly a gay float was appropriate. Without a doubt our voices needed to be heard more than ever. HIV may not be an exclusively gay disease, but who would be the most affected by a quarantine?

The morning of the Fourth dawned. Dolly Blue, a striking drag queen, had designed the float. She, along with the Texas Femme, Another Lee, and some helpers, were at the assembly site by 6:30 am. By the time Lover and I arrived at 8 am, a bit blurry-eyed from lack of sleep — a combination of excitement and nerves — the float was just about ready. It consisted of a jeep pulling an old hay trailer. A mannequin in red was the masthead. Behind her, Dolly stood resplendent in a brief red thing festooned with fringe. She wore a matching headress not much shorter than the Empire State Building. Silver and blue streamers were everywhere. We had an enormous boom box which played all-American disco music like "We Are Family" and what should be the gay national anthem, LeRoy Dysart's "We Are Everywhere."

Women's Land Laura, two brave local businesswomen, a student, Lover, and I lined the sides of the trailer. The Texas Femme

drove the jeep while Another Lee navigated. We had a lavender banner graced with a large pink triangle and the words, "Freedom to Be What I Am." We were not blatant, but we were more than subtle. I rode with my hands on Lover's shoulders when I wasn't waving. One of the businesswomen exhorted members of the crowd to join us. None did.

The moments before the parade began were the most trying. It was a perfect July day, with not-yet-hot sun filtering through the trees. Dolly Blue had been in the parade the year before and reported encountering nothing rougher than a letter to the paper reprimanding parade officials for allowing the likes of herself to exist. But '89 is the year after Proposition 8 passed, the year Oregon right-wingers are attacking our trustworthiness as foster parents, and the year the hysterics are trying to make my county an AIDS-Free Zone. We were not one drag queen graciously waving to a crowd ready for dress-up and outrageousness, we were one drag queen and eight somewhat nervous yet resolute dykes pitching one more battle for the dignity and equality promised in the United States Constitution.

The initiative would require mandatory testing for the HIV virus for public health workers, hospital or emergency room patients, anyone arrested for sex-related or drug-related crimes, anyone with a history of blood transfusions, nursing home residents, employees in food preparation, child care workers and marriage license applicants, to name a few.

In addition, the initiative would provide that individuals who think they have come in contact with infected persons can demand that the county health department test those persons. The results of HIV tests would be available to anyone who suspected they'd had contact with bodily fluids of an infected individual. How many times might any of us be required to be tested just because we're queer? What would happen to the loved ones, or property, of those of us who have PWA friends? Imagine how magnified suspicion and prejudice would be for someone in a high risk group.

Still innocently ignorant of the dire machinations of the AIDS-Free powers, I worried on parade day that we'd be sandwiched between the Praise the Lord Float and the National Guard. That we'd be pelted by revolted stares and curses — or worse.

Nothing of the sort happened. Some onlookers obviously never figured us out at all. Others took a while, but when the light bulbs went off in their heads, wolf-whistled and flirted with Dolly Blue.

I was moved by the apparently heterosexual people who shouted "Good for you!" or "That's what it's all about!" Some spoke with us, amazed and pleased by our courage. My former supervisor shouted my name and pointed me out to his preschool daughter and his wife, all grins, like he was really proud to see me there.

Best of all were the reactions of the lesbians and gay men along the route. Those in the know greeted us with explosions of enthusiasm. Surprised friends shouted approval. A few quietly smiled, apparently proud but fearful. Best of all were the gays who didn't know us, hadn't expected us, and could hardly contain themselves when they realized what we were all about. Like the women who held up their hands, silently shouting in universal sign language before all of Ashland and all the world, "I love you!"

Can you blame them? We'd claimed the freedom of the American nation, the freedom to be ourselves in the face of all oppression.▼