

Coming out, coming home

As a "lesbian activist from Lake Oswego," I was the subject of a front page story in the Lake Oswego Review and came out to the entire population of my hometown

BY JULIE BAUMLER

As National Coming Out Day (October 11) grows nearer, I have been trying to determine what I should do this year to celebrate it, and have been weighing how much I've moved in and out of the closet in the last year.

I say moved into the closet because in spite of the fact that I'm out at school to all my friends, to all my relatives with whom I willingly speak, and walk around Portland in T-shirts and buttons in varying degrees of blatancy, there are still times when I willfully disguise, tone down, or ignore my sexuality. Oh sure, I usually have reasons, but it's still going back in the closet. Yeah, it didn't feel safe to confront those two guys on the bus who were calling a third "faggot," but perhaps if I had they would have stopped. And it's true that, the time in my sociology class when someone made an ignorant comment about gays, I was tired and didn't feel like participating, but by not doing so I encouraged her and the rest of the class to believe her erroneous information. And the other day when a "Yo, Baby"-type guy tried to get me to go out with him, it would have been much more effective to say, "Yo, Dude, I'm a dyke, leave me alone," instead of deciding it was too early in the morning to be anything but noncommittal. And yes, adding Irving's name (my cat) to my phone directory listing does eliminate confusion as to which number is mine and which is the rest of my family's. Using just my first name would work just as well except that I wouldn't be implying that I'm living with — and am therefore protected by — a man (although to be truthful, my cat is probably better protection than many men I know).

The most dangerous example of my going back in the closet is that I've made an effort to keep one of my bosses from knowing that I'm a lesbian. I can attempt to excuse myself by saying that if he'd known he probably wouldn't have hired me, that I don't wear my most blatant shirts because I want to keep them nice, that I've been less careful as time goes on, that my coming out would probably also pull my co-worker out of the closet, that if he ever asked I'd tell him. But these things don't change the fact that if he knew that two of his employees were gay he might be forced to re-evaluate some of his prejudices. And that every time I stay in the closet I allow people to wallow in the complacency of their homophobia and heterosexism.

On the other hand, I've come out to 8,600 people this year — give or take a few hundred. This translates to the entire population of my hometown plus some — my old neighbors, family friends, my 4-H leader and group members, my pediatrician, my scout leader and fellow scouts, the veterinarian I occasionally accompanied on rounds, the shop keepers who take my face as a check guarantee card and ask about my family, my friends from camp, old classmates, many people who have been part of my life since my parents moved to Dunthorpe/Lake Oswego when I was 12. I managed this feat because as a "lesbian activist from Lake Oswego," I was the subject of a front page story in the Lake Oswego Review on July 27.

It all started innocuously enough. I was helping plan a demonstration to mark the third anniversary of the Hardwick decision. To get media attention, one of the organizers sent press releases to every paper in the phone book. Having grown up in Lake Oswego, I knew that the Review wouldn't publish anything unless it had a local tie-in. I decided to do my part and call the Review, tell them I was involved in planning the demonstration, had grown up in Lake Oswego, and ask them to cover it. This was a hard thing for me to do because Lake Oswego is sort of the one place where I was closeted, as I was afraid of what the reaction would be if I came out. The day of the rally, Steve Law, a reporter for the Review, called and said that they'd be willing to cover the event if they could focus the article on me. I had some misgivings but I figured I was seldom in Lake Oswego anymore anyway, so I agreed. Steve Law came to the rally and interviewed me a week later. That part was easy, even pleasant. The hard part came next — waiting for the article to come out. For three weeks I worried that I'd said something dumb, that I'd come off badly, that no one in Lake Oswego would ever talk to me again. My mother and my friends weren't very helpful. Their feeling was I'd made my bed, now I had to lie in it. I must admit, I wasn't particularly supportive of my mother, either, and her friends were going to see this too.

The Review got a deluge of letters and calls (which for the Review means more than a dozen), and even published an editorial pointing out the fallacy and injuriousness of the homophobia shown by many of the letters. A number of people commented to my mother about it. But the only people who have said a thing about it to me were my gay friends — many of whom I had told to look for it. I don't just mean that acquaintances I run into on the street don't mention it, I mean *nobody* — a friend of my family from Lake Oswego gave me a ride the week after the article came out, and he didn't say anything. The last time I was in the Review, at 14 with another member of my 4-H club and our rabbits, it seemed like everyone I knew mentioned it, and we weren't even on the front page. It's kind of scary, knowing that all these people know and don't say anything, but I figure that if they strongly objected they'd say something — either that or totally avoid me. Instead, most people pretend nothing ever happened.

The best part of coming out in the Review, scary as it was, is that it has given me back my hometown. Before the article came out, as much as I like it there, I tended to avoid Lake Oswego. I wasn't comfortable being out there, let alone blatant, yet I was uncomfortable being closeted. Now when I go to Lake Oswego I feel like all parts of my life are reconciled, from my younger days as a 4-Her who wasn't allowed to go to Portland alone because it was too dangerous, to the (lesbian) woman I am now. To many of my friends, Lake Oswego may be part of the conservative suburbs, but to me it's part of my history, and it's home. And now that I've come out there, I feel more comfortable coming out in other situations. My attitude is "Hey, the entire population of Lake Oswego knows I'm gay, what's a few more?"



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