

# Just news

## Homophobia focus of campus conference

*Continued visibility, coming out to heterosexual students, professors and administrators, is crucial to gay activism on campus*

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

As more gay and lesbian students emerge from closeted life, campus-based homophobia has also come out of hiding, a national gay leader told Oregon students at a conference last month.

Kevin Berrill, director of campus and anti-violence projects for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said that "visibility has a price. Both on campus and off, there's been a tremendous increase in anti-gay violence."

About 50 students, including some from Reed College and Lewis and Clark College, joined others from Oregon State University at the conference, held at the University of Oregon in Eugene. The one-day forum focused on campus issues for lesbian and gay students, including responding to harassment, developing leadership in lesbian organizations and acting politically.

Berrill said that statistics gathered by the NGLTF from college campuses demonstrate increased visibility and action from gay student groups as well as an accompanying backlash. To date, more than 120 schools have added sexual orientation to their non-discrimination policies, he said; at the same time, 34 schools reported a total of 1,400 anti-gay incidents last year.

"As long as we're invisible, the homophobia is less visible as well," he said. "As we become more vocal, more visible, the fearful members of the dominant group react violently."

Such incidents, Berrill said, aim to divide the community by making gay and lesbian students fearful; they are intended to carry a message not only to the individual attacked, but to the group. For that reason, he said, the gay and lesbian community must support people who are victims of violence and educate each other about violence prevention and response.

Brown University, for instance, has established hotlines for communication about anti-gay violence and given training to campus security staff about such incidents.

Berrill stressed that continued visibility, particularly individual instances of coming out to heterosexual students, professors and administrators, is crucial to gay activism on campus.

"You can't change what people think and feel," he said. "But you can focus on behavior

— that it is not okay to yell 'faggot' or 'dyke' across the campus, that it is not okay to put harassing notes on people's doors.

"Harassment is intended to keep us invisible and keep us in our place," he said. "It's when we are who we are, unapologetically, with heterosexuals, that we have a measurable impact on attitudes."

In an interview following the morning session of the conference, Berrill acknowledged that being "who we are" can be especially difficult at the college level, when many students are still making decisions about their sexual identity. Campus gay and lesbian groups often have trouble defining themselves and deciding whether their primary goal is to sponsor social events, provide support or act politically.

"Some students get all freaked out if they come into a meeting with lots of talk about political activism when they're still trying to decide if gay is okay," he said.

Successful gay student groups have made alliances with the women's community, people-of-color groups and Jewish groups to combat sexism, racism, anti-Semitism and homophobia as linked issues, Berrill said.

His visits to Oregon campuses revealed a range of awareness about gay and lesbian issues. He conducted a training for 35 faculty and staff at the University of Oregon; a similar workshop at Lewis and Clark drew only three people besides students — one resident adviser and two faculty members.

Still, anti-gay violence is one of the few issues that draws consensus from both the gay and straight community, Berrill said, and is a productive avenue for legislation such as

Oregon's anti-intimidation bill, which passed in the 1989 session. With that bill, Oregon became one of five states with laws addressing anti-gay violence. Berrill said the passage of a federal hate-crimes statistics bill, which would mandate data-collection on crimes against gays and lesbians as well as other minorities, is one priority for the task force this year.

Berrill reminded the students that, in spite of the rise in anti-gay violence, gay men and lesbians have made huge gains over the last two decades.

"When I entered adolescence 20 years ago

in Brookfield, Connecticut, everything I'd ever heard in the media or in books was that gay and lesbian people were sinful, sick, depraved creatures. Ann Landers was still saying we could change if we wanted to.

"I vowed that I was going to change, and that if I was still queer by the time I was 17 I was going to hang myself with a necktie.

"Well, I'm still here. And I'm still queer," he said. "If this is the worst of times, it is in some respects the best of times as well."

## Harassment: how do you respond?

You and a friend are sitting in a restaurant. Three teenagers at a nearby table begin taunting you — quietly at first, then louder. "Hey...faggot...look at those two. It's disgusting!" Do you taunt them in return, alert the head waiter, move to another table, leave the restaurant?

In a workshop on responding to harassment, Kevin Berrill of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force offered no pat answers for such situations. Instead, he suggested ways to evaluate possible responses.

People responding to harassment should keep in mind the following criteria, he said:

- 1) Does the response keep you safe, physically and emotionally?
- 2) Does the response challenge or deter the victimizing behavior?
- 3) Does it leave you feeling powerful and respectful of yourself?
- 4) Does it show respect for the basic

human dignity of the harasser?

When someone is harassing you, it rarely makes sense to engage in conversation about homosexuality and equal rights, he said. The issue is not your sexuality or your behavior; the issue is harassment. Some ingredients of an effective and safe response are:

- 1) Name the behavior. Say "that is harassment" or "you are harassing me." Be specific: "I heard you use the word 'dyke' and that is offensive to me."
- 2) Let the person know how you feel, and that you're not alone. Say something like: "I don't like that behavior, and no one else in the restaurant does either."
- 3) Tell the person to stop.
- 4) Disengage from the conversation.
- 5) If you are with someone else, check in before you respond so you can support each other.

"Every time we're called dyke or faggot or queer, it's a reminder to us that we're hated," Berrill said. "And it serves another purpose — to divide us from ourselves."

— Anndee Hochman

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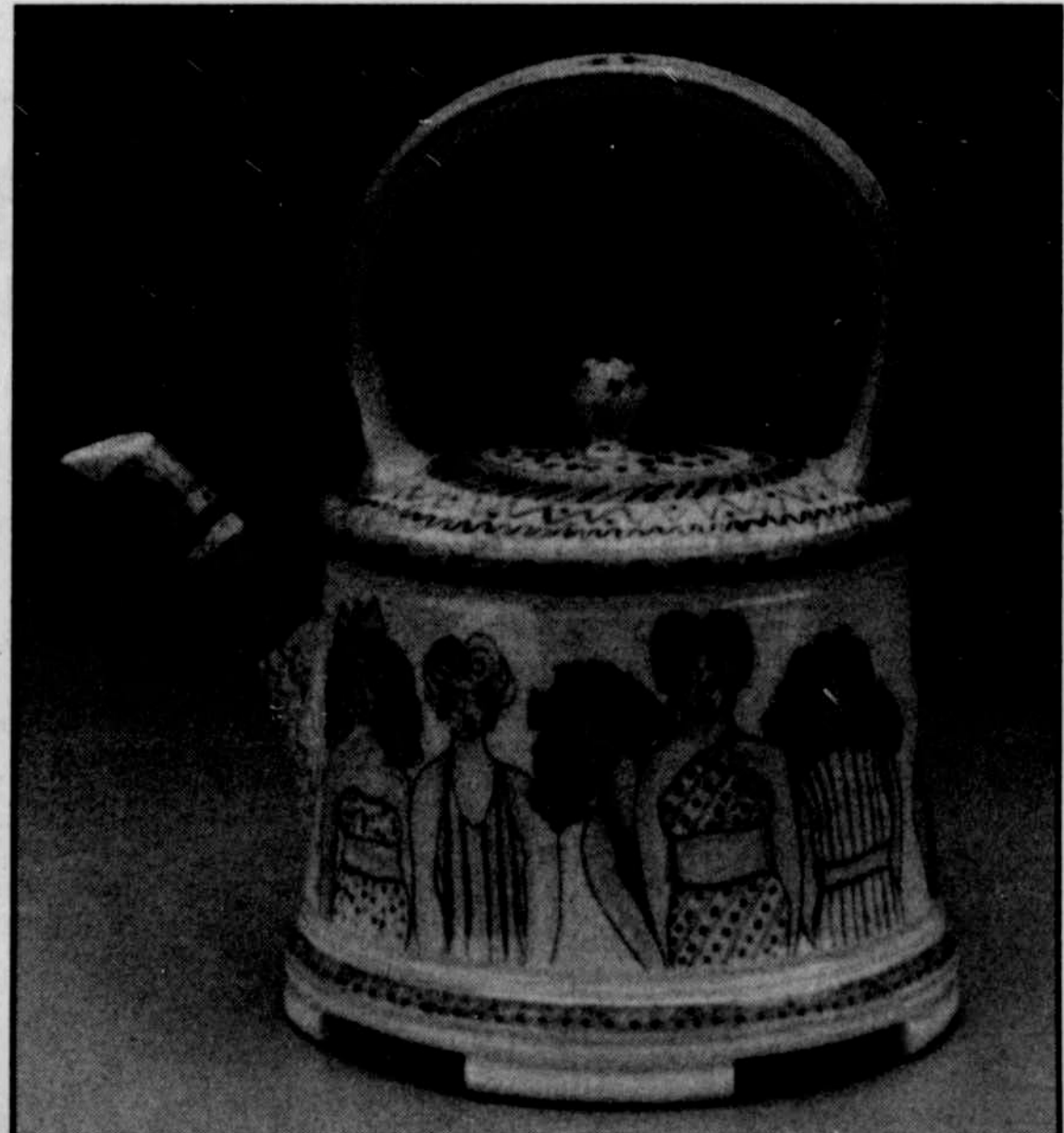
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