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Portland hosts P/FLAG regional conference

"New Frontiers for the 90s" hopes to reach beyond active city-based chapters to the small towns and rural areas of the region

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

The phone call eight years ago gave Norma Walters a double helping of unexpected news. Her daughter was being discharged from the U.S. Navy. The reason for the discharge: she was a lesbian.

Walters phoned a contact number for Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, attended a meeting and began to ask questions. Today she serves on the board of the local chapter.

"I was in a pretty bad way because I didn't have much information. The group helped in getting me away from the stereotypes. I read a lot. And getting to know a lot of the gay people was the most helpful to me."

In an upcoming conference of the Pacific Northwest region of P/FLAG, Walters and other members of the Portland chapter hope to extend that support to more parents, especially those outside of urban areas.

One of the goals of the conference, titled "New Frontiers for the 90s," is to find ways of reaching beyond active city-based chapters to the small towns and rural areas of the region, which includes Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Alaska and western Canada.

Marge Work, newly elected regional director of P/FLAG, wants to focus on places — such as the Oregon coast — where gay men, lesbians and their parents may believe there is no one who shares their concerns.

"We have isolated parents who really need to be in touch with other parents," she said. "It's frustrating because you know there are parents out there, and you want to reach them." When gay and lesbian issues receive attention in Dear Abby columns or on nationally televised talk shows, national P/FLAG offices in Denver and Washington, D.C. receive thousands of phone calls. As regional contact, Work fields about 30 calls each month from gay men, lesbians and their parents.

Whether parents of gay children live in urban centers or tiny rural towns, they share many of the same feelings, said Work and other members of Portland P/FLAG.

AIDS is a universal concern among parents of gay men, and parents with lifelong religious ties may find themselves suddenly pitted against their church's intolerance of homosexuality.

Another ongoing issue is parents' willingness to be "out," whether in discussions about their children or in response to homophobic remarks by friends or strangers.

"Too often, we hear something and we wince, but we don't say anything," said Catherine Shuck, the mother of a gay son and president of the Portland P/FLAG chapter. "We hope to help people respond to those things in a positive manner."

Marge Work remembers the occasion, while attending a seminar three years ago,

when she mentioned her involvement with P/FLAG to another participant. Later the woman invited Work to have dinner and, during the meal, confided that her daughter was a lesbian. She had never told anyone before.

"That was my realization that I was going to talk about this as frequently and as naturally as it came up in the conversation," Work said. But she recognizes that other parents may feel apprehensive or tongue-tied when confronted with similar situations.

"All of us have a hard time, if we're around someone who doesn't know [about a son's or daughter's sexual orientation] and they tell a joke or make some kind of hurtful statement. It's hard to know what to say. I tell parents to practice," she said.

The national P/FLAG Federation includes 246 chapters and maintains contact people in almost every state. In Portland, the group meets on the fourth Wednesday of each month and considers its mission three-fold: to support gay sons, lesbian daughters and their families; to challenge myths about homosexuality and to work toward gay rights.

The passage of Ballot Measure 8 in 1988, which revoked Gov. Neil Goldschmidt's order banning discrimination against lesbians and gay men in state hiring and services, both catalyzed and sobered P/FLAG members, Work said.

"For some, it made it harder because they felt it was validation of all the negative things they heard from society," she said.

To combat those damaging stereotypes, Work urges parents to attend local P/FLAG meetings, where they will likely meet others at the same stage of adjustment.

"We hope to get our parents more comfortable about being open," said Shuck. "From my own experience, I know this is not easy to do. I have a son who is very out of the closet, so I get a lot of support."

The conference, scheduled for May 5 at the Portland Inn, will include workshops on religious issues, community outreach and "positive response to negative statements." A lesbian couple with a child will lead a discussion of "our new families," and a special seminar the following morning will deal with AIDS and family support.

Conference organizers hope to stress the role of extended family in the lives of gay men, lesbians and their parents — "family" that may include grandparents, colleagues, neighbors, friends and other P/FLAG members.

"We are the most pro-family group you could ever find," Work said. "We want to see families together, not see them driven apart by this issue."

For more information about the conference, contact Catherine Shuck at 223-0960. The Portland P/FLAG hotline number is 232-7676.



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