

SNAP SHOTS OF DIVERSITY: THE YEAR IN PROFILES

Portland gay men, lesbians voice range of possibilities

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN



As the old buttons used to proclaim in the heady first days of gay liberation, "We are everywhere." And we do everything. Gay men and lesbians produce radio programs and raise teenagers, own coffee shops and lobby the Legislature, counsel and advocate, perform and play.

That's always been true. The difference in the 21 years since Stonewall is that more of us are willing to say so.

In the past year, a dozen Portland lesbians and gay men have discussed their lives and their work in the pages of Just Out. In doing so, they challenge our stereotypes and express the astonishing diversity of this community.

In the movement toward equality for all people, each step deserves celebration. Each voice matters. When a lesbian tells the truth about her life, or a gay man says what is really on his mind, they stretch the limits of what is thinkable, what is possible. If silence equals death, then the words of lesbians and gay men do nothing less than affirm all of our lives.

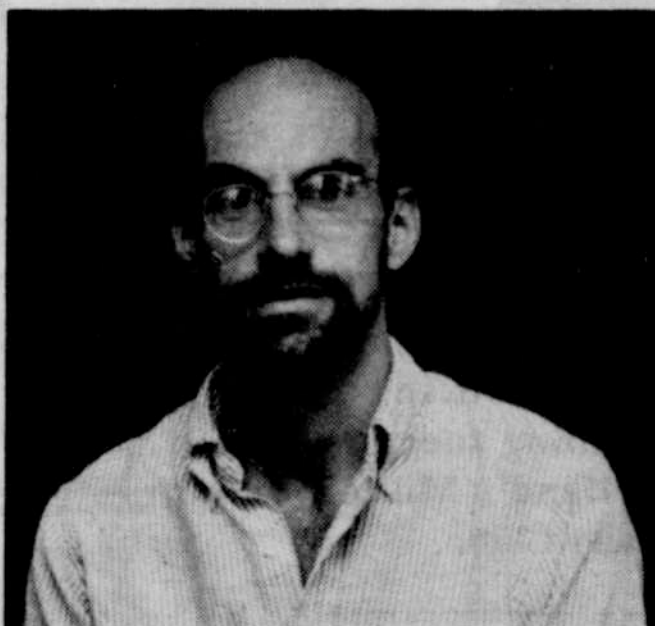


Linda Shirley, KBOO's "dyke behind the mike," New England expatriate with a voice like 100 yards of Boston asphalt, independent producer of lesbian artists, musicians and writers.

"There is a lesbian culture. There are writers, there are musicians, there are poets, dancers. Women who reflect our lives, who

share the same values, the same experiences. Without culture, you lose your roots. You're kind of wandering through this map of blandness.

"In small communities like Portland, it's really hard to be an out lesbian and feel good about it sometimes. You read the papers, and you see the lies they tell about us. You see women in the Marine Corps getting sentenced for having 'affection' toward another woman. You see all these things, and you think, 'God, I'm a piece of shit.' We need women to say 'No, you're not a piece of shit. You're great. You're wonderful. You're beautiful. You've made an incredibly good choice in your life, and let's celebrate it.'"



Bob Weinrich, one of the four partners who run the MRC Counseling Center in Southeast Portland, conducting groups and individual sessions with gay and straight men, learning as he teaches others.

"One difficulty that we are faced with on an ongoing basis is how clients — our straight clients — react and deal with the knowledge that we serve all men, including gay men, and how that raises homophobia... the fine line is to educate without alienating.

"How do you know when you're making a difference? Well, you see a change. You see a change in a person from when they first came to see you to when they're ready to leave.

"The results feel very tangible in the domestic violence program, when there's solid evidence that violence has stopped that, guys are learning new behaviors. Sometimes, it's almost like you can feel it in the air, the feeling that people have been helped and are helping each other."



Elizabeth Waters, working in health care for more than a decade, raising her voice about racism, classism, elitism, reminding people who ought to know better, living her principles.

"I certainly don't see any of the existing AIDS organizations really doing very much in terms of including people of color.... I think it happens by omission. What happens is that people look in the mirror and assume that everybody thinks and looks and acts like them. It goes beyond the issue of race; it's also a class issue.

"It's hard to work with people who are different than we are. We want to surround ourselves with people who are like us. I mean, I want to do that, too. But to me, the issue becomes: do I want to get this message out, or do I want to feel comfortable?"

"When I was in the second grade, my mother used to drive us to picket Woolworth's. We wanted to watch cartoons on Saturday afternoons. But she took us there from a very young age. And she told us, she ingrained in us, 'You have to stand up for your rights.' That is very much a part of who I am."



Lady Elaine Peacock, a vision in skintight sequins, with a shelf of cheekbone, an ocean of hair, legs long enough to cross the state line. In the same body, Elwood "Woody" Johnson, a friendly businessman with a staccato laugh. The two of them, smashing society's sacred gender barrier — and loving it.

"A lot of people have never seen me out of drag. Sometimes I go up to people and say, 'Hi, how are you?' and they look at me so funny, like 'Who are you? I don't even know any black people.' And then I tell them, 'I'm Lady Elaine Peacock.' And they're all embarrassed.

"I educate people every chance I get. When I was in college — I went to PCC on Killingsworth — there was a church group there. They were something else. This one woman in particular, she was in love with me. She had a crush on me. Well, first she thought she could change me after she found out I was gay.

"Then when she found out I was wearin' dresses, I think she sort of gave up. She realized she wasn't going to change me, because I was going to be me, and I wanted the world to know who and what I was, and I didn't care what they thought. I think you get along better in life that way."



Debra Jane (D.J.) Novgrad and Gabrielle Duvall, renovating a Waldport house into the Cliff House bed and breakfast, learning as they installed copper pipe, insulated floors, tiled the bathrooms, nailed up the cedar wainscoting. The result: the house that D.J. dared, the house that Gabrielle dreamed.

D.J.: "It's a homey atmosphere. And people want to come home. They want a sense of home. Because it doesn't exist any more. I think people are looking for that.

"We really complement each other. She's the theater, dramatic type, and I'm the down-to-the-earth coach. I tell people what to do. I'm the methodical, the goal oriented one. I make my lists and cross things off."

Gabrielle: "When we would lose inspiration, we would look up and look out to the ocean. It was awe inspiring. To think of how different every wave is, when we were confronted with so many different circumstances we didn't know the answer to. And yet every one has its place. Every board has a right place. We did break away and come out here, that took our individual courage. But anybody can do it if they want to. It's keeping the magic alive."

