C O M M E N T A R Y

Retrospect on one parade

The impact is there; it takes seeing from a different perspective

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Last year in this space, I criticized the first Margins to the Mainstream campaign, the Lesbian Community Project's idea to boost visibility. The campaign featured an ad published in the *Oregonian* and *Willamette Week*. You remember the one: Seven women in Groucho Marx masks with the caption, "We're more like you than you thought."

I thought the ad was misguided, an assimilationist message in a chock-full-of-difference world. I said people should be taught tolerance of other people, not because they buy the same kind of toilet paper or send their kids to the same schools, but simply because they exist.

In that same column, I noted the gay and lesbian float in last year's Starlight Parade.

"We are not a new brand of detergent," I wrote, my tongue curled firmly in cheek. "It's true that the float brought the 'G' and 'L' words into a mainstream parade for the first time; it's certain that the sight of 29 gay men and lesbians, smiling and scrubbed as a troupe of Mouseketeers, waving flags to Disney music, packed an emotional punch but attitudes involve both hearts and minds."

Writing commentary in the newspaper carries a built-in problem. The ink dries and sticks, but ideas keep moving. One year later, you pull out the column from the hamster cage or the scrapbook or the recycling pile, and it still says exactly what you thought. What you used to think.

That's a difference between print and people. Print never changes its mind.

This year, I sat in the rain for three-and-a-half hours waiting for the gay and lesbian float to make its second annual appearance in the Starlight Parade. And when it winked into view on Taylor Street, rolling steadily up the hill toward Thirteenth Avenue all those lights criss-crossing in the blue night air, I felt a tingle of electricity myself.

The float was stunning. But that's not what changed my thinking. Of course, I would be excited about the float; naturally I would want to applaud the people on it—friends and colleagues, members of our community. The crowd at the Embers had already given the float a rousing welcome. Same at Tenth and Stark. I should hope so.

But my friends and I were posted up at Thirteenth and Taylor, near the parade's end. We sat around a table with a striped cloth umbrella that permitted us to get drenched somewhat more gradually than other people. I was the only lesbian in our bunch of seven.

Around us were . . . well, folks. A barrel-shaped man with a military haircut whose mother waved wildly to one of the girls in the Hillsboro High School band. A thirtysomething couple, sitting side-by-side in lawn chairs. A family, apparently veteran Starlight Parade-goers, who set up a tent in the back of a pick-up with a blue tarp and a couple of 2x4s.

Folks. You know the type. You see them at Safeway, in line at the post office, taking their kids to the park on Sunday afternoons. And they see us, too. They just don't know about it.

This is what happened when the float neared our little corner of downtown. People started applauding—loudly, because the display of multi-colored lights outdid most of what we'd been watching for the last few hours.

As it got closer, maybe they kept clapping because this float seemed to be about people—not about a beer company or an airline. The float rolled closer still, and some folks waved at the people standing aboard. The riders looked spiffy in tuxedo shirts, black slacks and cummerbunds, and they were smiling up a storm, waving those lighted flags in enthused, if not always perfect, rhythm.

Then the sign came into view. A big sign. Crisp lettering on a clean white background. "Lesbian and Gay Communities of Oregon." Some of the applause dwindled out. A few bystanders looked embarrassed to have been caught clapping. A few others—my table among them—kept up a steady cheer. Some people just looked baffled, trying to make it all compute: Starlight Parade, gays and lesbians . . . what's going on here?

Those were the folks who changed my mind. Their expressions, the murmuring to neighbors, the second look at the float, eyes wider than before—those were the signs of people coming face to face with a contradiction, a wrinkle in their world-view.

Parades aren't designed to trouble the consciences of bystander. Parades celebrate the icons of our time, the images that tell us nothing much has changed, all is right and proper with the world. High school girls in satin gowns. High school boys with shiny trombones. The Royal Rosarians. The Chamber of Commerce.

Our float refused to let the looking be easy.

Down at the Embers a few nights before the parade, a half-dozen riders chanted a hopeful mantra—"it's not going to rain"—and practiced their routine to "Celebration" by Kool and the Gang. Flags forward, flags back, flags up, flags down.

"People have an idea about what we look like," said Ellen Galloway, whose small stature and shoulder-length hair give her a "passing" ticket she doesn't really want. "I walk down the street and nobody knows I'm a lesbian. It pisses me off. I want them to see that we look like real people."

How to make people see? How to show them the real human beings inside the stereotypes? There are dozens of ways. The ballot box. The classroom. Television, art, literature, politics. Billboards and documentaries, graffiti and speeches. You can come out to your boss, speak up about your cousin's homophobic joke; ask your minister to change the sexist language in the liturgy.

A lot of possibilities. They do not cancel each other out. On the contrary, they overlap, gather texture and strength. The private acts and public marches, the tiny tentative steps and the huge bold ones add up in the end. They add up to a movement. Maybe even a parade.

I wrote last year that images alone can't educate, that you have to tweak some brain cells in order to change opinions. I still think that. We could ride a float in every mainstream parade in America, from Philadelphia to Pendleton, and that still wouldn't end gay-bashing crimes or win health benefits for our partners.

But it wouldn't be a waste of time, either. Parades bring out tens of thousands of people, folks who will line the sidewalks and spend hours just looking at French horn players and Shriners, clowns and drill teams. If we're there, they'll look at us too. Maybe for the first time.

Ellen Galloway and 29 other real people rode through the rain last month to make a point. After the float pulled away into the damp night, you could almost hear a crackle in the air. Could be the sound of last year's newsprint, crunched into a ball and lobbed into the nearest trash can. Could be the noise of minds working to make connections.

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