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just news

March fuses diverse groups

The coalitions and friendships that were built cut through old prejudices

by Dakota Stone

The activities and coalition-building marking the week of Oct. 5 through 13 showed that despite broad diversity, many Portlanders define dignity in the same way. For the first time in the memory of those involved with Dignity and Diversity Week, racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, cultural oppression, sexism and child abuse came under attack as the multiple symptoms of a single serious illness: hate.

Those who helped organize the week's events concede that if there was a wrinkle marring the celebration, it was that it took the trial of a known white supremacist to make it happen. It's very likely that had Tom Metzger not been forced to answer in court on Oct. 8 for the beating death of Mulugeta Seraw, the estimated 3,000 marchers who took to the streets on Oct. 7 wouldn't have given voice to the community's unanimous demand for an end to crimes of oppression.

Donna Redwing, executive director of the Lesbian Community Project, recalled an emotional moment on the day of the march as she crossed the Burnside Bridge near the front of the procession. "I looked back, and there were people from sidewalk to sidewalk, as far as I could see," she said. The marchers included representatives of many ethnic groups, gays and straights, children and the elderly — a united front that by Redwing's reckoning broadcast a dual message: to the many skinheads from around the country who came to Portland to observe the trial, it said that Portland will not put up with the likes of Tom Metzger. And with the help of the national media who covered the events and trial, it presented the world with a picture more complete than simply Portland's "sleazy underbelly."

LCP was just one of numerous grass-roots groups involved in organizing the week's events. The steering committee included an eclectic assortment of members, from USWest to the Black United Front, and from the New Jewish Agenda to the Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice (SHARP). The groups worked hand in hand with each other, with law enforcement officials and with such public agencies as the Metropolitan

Human Rights Commission (MHRC).

Redwing, being part of the planning process and not just invited to the party, assured that the gay and lesbian agenda was not only represented, but visible from the outset. Jeannette Pai, executive director of MHRC and one of the week's key organizers, noted in retrospect that it made sense to involve the gay community and other groups in the planning stages and added that Portland needs to do more of that sort of networking.

"The coalitions that have been established are ones that probably wouldn't have been, historically," Pai said.

The Rev. Gary Wilson, pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church which became a hub for planning the Oct. 7 march and rally, agreed with the need for coalition-building among the area's diverse groups. "I think that's what we have to do more and more," he said. "We can't sit back and say we don't like their politics or the way they comb their hair or the way they wear their jeans." Wilson said it was a powerful experience to watch new alliances being forged between the black and gay and lesbian communities, and between Hispanic and women's groups. He also noticed that as police worked with left-wing groups, each respected the other at the table, even though they often disagreed. And he saw close personal friendships develop across the diversity of the community, as old fears and distrust were shattered. "Any of those bonds developed benefit us in the long run," he said.

Echoing the sentiment of many, Pai deemed the week a clear success, especially in light of all those who donned the rainbow-colored ribbons that symbolized the unity of the community in its diversity. "One of the things plaguing our community is a hesitancy to get involved," she said. "For some people, wearing the ribbon was the most they could do. It was the biggest risk they could take."

Pai said the week's major accomplishment was bringing into focus a problem that the Portland community has long had and denied. Most people, she said, don't want to hear that their city has a hate crime problem. (In fact, statistics show that Portland has one of the country's highest



Sylvia Wallula, an elder with the Warm Springs tribe says a prayer before the march begins.

rates of hate crimes and violence against gays and lesbians.) Thanks in large part to Dignity and Diversity Week, Pai said, area residents can no longer run from the fact that a problem exists — and that individuals can be part of the solution.

Although no one seems opposed to the idea of an annual Dignity and Diversity Week, it appears more likely that any broadcast of a similar message in the future will be in a format different from that instigated by the Metzger trial. Whatever form it takes, organizers acknowledge that the message will have to be delivered again and again and again. They expressed hope that such groups as the Coalition for Human Dignity and the Community Defense Coalition will carry on with the work begun this fall. And they were adamant that the week reflected a beginning, not a conclusion.

"Nothing would have been accomplished if that's the end," said Jeffrey Hart, a member of ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. "The message got out loud and clear that Oregon will not stand for any bigotry and hate. But we have built-in forgetters. As soon as the pain goes away and the memory fades, we forget. And the Metzgers are always out there."

Indeed Metzger's recorded phone message following Multnomah County's jury's verdict against Metzger and the White Aryan Resistance said Portland arians needed to get together to support their cause in Portland, the Northwest and Canada.

"The foundation is alive and well. Don't worry my friends, WAR-TV and WAR will continue . . ." Metzger said. "Get ready for the influx of Californian white racists fleeing the crap. And remember, this is WAR."

Metzger told members not to communicate with police or the media. He also gave the address of rental property owned by Judge Ancer L. Haggerty, telling listeners that the rental was a suspected drug house and that maybe they should "check it out."

For more information, call the Community Defense Coalition at 232-2159 or ACT UP at 284-0262.



An estimated 3,000 marchers turned out to demand an end to crimes of oppression.