

Eradicating bias crime

Leadership symposium calls on each of us to fight bias crimes

by Jim Hunger

The Citizens' Bureau Advisory Committee of the Portland Police Bureau sponsored "A Leadership Symposium on Bias Crimes" June 30 in order "to provide a structure by which the diverse elements of Portland's community can be brought together in a partnership to eradicate the scourge of bias crimes and malicious harassment from our city." Donna Red Wing, executive director of the Lesbian Community Project, officiated at the meeting in her capacity as vice-chair of the BAC.

Red Wing called on the 150 attendants to the symposium to make a three-month commitment to one of six subcommittees being organized to address specific aspects in the struggle against bias crimes. The subcommittees are: Bias Crimes Alert Network; Business Leadership; Community Leadership; Law Enforcement; Legislative Action; and Victim Support. The subcommittees will advise Police Chief Tom Potter and the Police Bureau as well as provide for outreach and liaison between the bureau and the community.

Chief Potter, prefacing his remarks with an announcement that the Southeast Uplift office had suffered a smoke grenade attack earlier in the day, purportedly by the White Liberation Front, said, "I don't believe we have a lot of time to do

this. I think our work must increase. We must do quickly what we thought we had more time to do." Potter identified three steps in the process: communicate—provide and exchange information; develop partnerships; and collaborate, working together as one.

Bev Stein pointed out that "We are building on a lot that is already going on; this is not a first-time effort. There are people all over Portland who have done all kinds of things to address the issue of bias crime," she added, citing Southeast Uplift, the Anti-Bigotry Coalition and the Coalition for Human Dignity as examples. Stein suggested a five-step plan: help people develop sympathy; define the problem clearly for people; help people overcome their sense of paralysis about the problem; recognize that issues of bigotry and hatred stem from poverty and ignorance; we need to be allies in carrying a vision of hope.

Expressing deep concern, Bob Hughes of the Department of Justice's Region 10 office (Ore., Wash., Idaho, Wyo. and Mont.) discussed bias-crime trends across the Northwest. He noted a rapid increase in reported cases of malicious harassment from 265 a year in 1989 to 792 in 1991 for the region. Hughes described Oregon as a "model" state both in reporting and addressing the issue of bias crimes, with 474 reported cases.

People of Anglo-European heritage remain the largest perpetrator and victim groups, the latter primarily because these figures include white gays and lesbians. Other trends include increasingly violent crimes, greater use of firearms and more interrelatedness of bias crimes.

Jeanette Pai noted, "Hate and bias crimes occur in a broader environment. There are things about that broader environment that allow, either overtly or benignly, the crimes to increase." She suggested that "Anyone who fails to challenge bigoted jokes or misconceptions are a part of the problem." Pai called for continuing work on developing a five-state uniform reporting system; coalition building, especially between groups that don't traditionally interact; developing broad-based community education programs; assisting local communities in setting up human rights groups and in responding to incidents.

At Pai's request, Colonel Russell briefly described an Oregon State Police program being developed, called Race Awareness in Cultural Education. Working with the governor's office and the educational system, RACE would have as its goal teaching tolerance and understanding to schoolchildren. Law-enforcement officers would be sent into third- through seventh-grade classrooms to help accomplish this.

Mike Schunk assured meeting attendants of the dedication of the District Attorney's office to fight bias crimes: "Simply stated, we want to send a message loud and clear: hate and bias crimes are not tolerated in this community." Schunk encouraged people to get involved by speaking out and reporting crimes. "We will be proactive. We have made it a priority of our office," he emphasized.

Red Wing concluded the presentation part of the symposium, exhorting her audience: "We're really offering you an opportunity to become part of the solution tonight." True to her earlier

promise, she stood outside the door of the large conference room and pleasantly pressured everyone leaving to make a commitment to a subcommittee if s/he hadn't already. [Since I was attending as a member of the press, she was willing to let me through, but Red Wing had inspired me enough to turn around and join the community education subcommittee.]

In covering this symposium and the Bias Crime Education Exchange the night before at the King Neighborhood facility, I have been impressed by the sincerity of members of the law enforcement and government establishment in reaching out to all members of the community in a nonjudgmental way to work together to root out the societal cancer of bias.

In Portland we have the incredible good fortune to have—all at the same time, no less—admirable and humane leaders of our police bureau, district attorney's office and city government. Chief Potter, District Attorney Mike Schunk and Mayor Clark spend a lot of personal time out in the community and are accessible to everyone, demonstrating a philosophy that is reflected in their agencies as well. At the same time, a large and very diverse group of our community leaders, the best that Portland has to offer, is speaking out publicly against hatred and for the mutual respect and honoring of all of the diverse groups in our community.

Portland gay men and lesbians of every color have the unique opportunity to get involved in public advisory groups and organizations, to join with all of the diverse groups within our population and to share in the process of developing a more humane society.

For more information regarding the proactive community groups, call Donna Red Wing at the Lesbian Community Project, 223-0071.

Jim Hunger

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