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local news

A report from the southwest corner

The area has a reputation for relaxed back-to-the-land queers, fairy gatherings, lesbian collectives and home-grown creativity



PHOTO BY TEE A. CORINNE

Volunteers at the Rogue AIDS Awareness Network
by Tee A. Corinne

Oregon's six southwestern counties (Coos, Douglas, Josephine, Jackson, Klamath and Curry) have a great deal in common: history, economics, mutual accessibility. The area also has a reputation for relaxed back-to-the-land queers, fairy gatherings, lesbian collectives and home-grown creativity.

The anti-homosexual intent of the Oregon Citizens Alliance and Ballot Measure 9, which would deny basic civil rights to lesbians and gay men, has mobilized gay and lesbian voters to organize. We may, in the years to come, look back on this time with gratitude for the galvanizing effect this danger has provided and the allies we have found.

Each county differs in the degree of services and community institutions that exist. Coos, Douglas, Jackson and Klamath counties have social organizations that advertise through the lesbian and gay media. Social organizations cannot have political agendas, but they can invite individuals to speak on political topics. It is noteworthy that the counties with active social groups also have the strongest HIV and AIDS services.

Activities in Josephine and Curry counties are less obvious to the casual traveler. Josephine, like other counties on the I-5 corridor (often referred to as the Amazon Trail), has had a vibrant series of interlocking women's communities dating from the early 1970s. Land-based men's communities used to be more numerous; however, one of these still draws residents and visitors from all over the country. Members of a religious group led by radio evangelist Roy Masters have changed the live-and-let-live climate of the county over the past 10 years and have sponsored workshops where misinformation about HIV and AIDS has been given out.

Curry, with a population roughly half that of Josephine, contains the coastal communities of Brookings/Harbor, Gold Beach, Port Orford and Langlois. Lesbians and gay men in Curry County connect through private acquaintanceship networks. An HIV task force is in the early stages of organizing.

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays has a bridging effect and reminds everyone that "family" is not an exclusively heterosexual word. The Northwest regional director is based in Jackson county, and PFLAG groups or contact persons are active in the five counties.

What does all this mean in terms of anti-OCA, pro-civil rights activism?

Some of the most effective work starts with people talking with their neighbors, friends, family and those they work with. Informative house parties are especially effective in areas where isolation and the threat of physical violence seems high. Human rights groups exist in two counties and are beginning in others. Political information groups like No on 9, Coos County, have been highly visible with press conferences, a radio talk show debate and booths at local fairs.

Some religious groups are openly supportive in Klamath, Jackson and Douglas counties. A number of other congregations are still deciding how they want to respond.

Talks by knowledgeable experts are drawing attention to issues: presentations by Kevin Berill of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force; Donna Red Wing of the Lesbian Community Project; Urvashi Vaid, executive director of NGLTF; Suzanne Pharr from the Women's Project (Arkansas); Marcy Westerling, who works with Women's Crisis Networks; and Ellen Lowe of the Ecumenical Ministries and No on 9.

Additionally, people are writing letters to editors and friends, raising money for No on 9 (formerly Campaign for a Hate Free Oregon), and wearing small pink triangles or big buttons. They are also coming in increasing numbers to formal and informal gatherings and encouraging family, friends, neighbors and co-workers to vote for, rather than against, civil rights.

Some people are so frightened for their jobs that they have curtailed their social lives, won't go to any meetings and talk about the OCA only in whispers. Quietly they send money or stop to offer words of encouragement, saying, "Thanks for doing what you're doing. Keep it up."

We may win in November. Then again, we may not. But the networks are coming into place to fight the long and broad battle for human rights, not just for lesbians and gay men, but for all women, people of color and religious minorities as well. In a time when people all over the world need to learn to tolerate and embrace differences, perhaps in southwest Oregon we can find ways to get along with our neighbors to work for a world in which lesbians and gay men can live without fear.

Tee A. Corinne is a writer and artist who lives in southern Oregon.