local news

Change with the *Times*

While a few area newspapers readily print gay and lesbian wedding and birth notices,* The Oregonian *lags behind

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by Inga Sorensen

Michael Kelly says it was simply the right thing to do. Kelly, the editor of the *Tigard Times,* a weekly mainstream newspaper (circulation: 5,500) serving the Portland suburb of Tigard, says when a local mother approached the *Times* to ask it to print her gay son's wedding announcement, *Times* staff barely blinked. The same cannot be said, however, for the state's supposed newspaper of record, *The Oregonian,* which continues to adhere to its policy of banning same-sex announcements.

"It is our very strong feeling that our paper should be inclusive and representative of the community at large, and gays and lesbians are a part of our community," says Kelly, who has been editor of the *Tigard Times* for the past five years. Times Publications, which is partly owned by Denny Smith, a conservative Republican who recently made an unsuccessful bid to become governor, publishes several community weeklies including the *Tigard Times.*

"To the best of my knowledge this was the first time we had been approached to print a gay wedding announcement," says Kelly. "We simply felt that if we are going to print heterosexuals' announcements, then we should also print gay people's announcements. It wouldn't be right to exclude gay citizens."

The announcement, which ran in the *Times'* Nov. 10 issue, featured news of the Oct. 1 wedding of Seattle residents Jim Liebertz, a vice president and marketing manager with Washington Mutual Bank, and Dr. Felix Marcial, a dentist. More than 350 family and friends traveled from across the nation and Puerto Rico to share in the couple's celebration. Like many newlyweds, the duo sought to share the joyous news of their union with the community at large by having their wedding announcement printed in the newspaper. In this case, Liebertz and Marcial submitted an announcement to the *Seattle Times,* which printed it for a fee. Liebertz, who grew up in Portland and whose parents currently live in Tigard, also hoped *The Oregonian* would print the announcement. Liebertz thought to himself, "*The Oregonian* published the wedding announcements of five of my siblings, why should my request be treated any differently?"

"This was the happiest moment of my life and I wanted to share that with everybody," says the 33-year-old Liebertz. "I grew up in Portland. I went to college there. I know tons of people in Oregon. I mean, this was my hometown newspaper." Liebertz, who was in Seattle at the time, asked his mother to call *The Oregonian* to request that the couple's announcement be published.

"There wasn't any nastiness in their tone. They just simply said that they wouldn't do that," says 70-year-old Penny Liebertz, who, along with her husband Jerry, was on hand for her youngest son's wedding. "I am really proud of the *Tigard Times* for what they did. They treated my son fairly."

Says Kelly: "This is simply a reflection of what is going on in society. A newspaper has a responsibility to be objective and recognize this rather than holding on to an unreal notion of what society is like."

Donna Red Wing is the national chapter coordinator for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, a national organization that monitors anti-gay and -lesbian bias in mainstream media. Red Wing, the former executive director of the Portland-based Lesbian Community Project, says, "Five years ago it would have been considered revolutionary for a mainstream newspaper to print a same-sex wedding announcement. That's simply not the case anymore. If *The Oregonian* is worried about being on the cutting edge it doesn't have to, because many papers across the country are already doing this."

Among the newspapers that have abolished the practice of discriminating against gay men and lesbians who are seeking the same treatment as opposite-sex couples are: the *Salina* (Kan.) *Journal,* the *Austin-American Statesman,* the *Brattleboro* (Vt.) *Reformer,* the *Everett* (Wash.) *Daily Herald,* the *Greenfield* (Mass.) *Recorder,* the *Keene* (N.H.) *Sentinel,* the *Minneapolis Tribune,* the *Northampton* (Mass.) *Hampshire Gazette,* the *Marin* (Calif.) *Independent Journal,* the *San Jose Mercury News,* and the *Seattle Times.* Some papers, such as the *Seattle Times,* run heterosexuals' announcements for free, but make gay and lesbian couples pay for that opportunity.

Penny and Jerry Liebertz, Jim's proud parents, flank the happy couple

COMMITMENTS

In Celebration

Felix Marcial — Jim Liebertz

Dr. Felix Marcial and Jim Liebertz were married Oct. 1 in an afternoon ceremony before 350 guests. Attending the service were family and friends from as far away as Ohio, Michigan, New York and Puerto Rico. The wedding was held at the University Congregational Church, with the Rev. Ms. Dale Kelley presiding. The reception was held at the Shilshole Bay Beach Club, overlooking Puget Sound and the sunset over the Olympic Mountains.

Jim is the son of Penny and Jerry Liebertz of Tigard, Ore. He is a graduate of Portland State University and is a native of Portland, having lived in Tigard for 17 years. He worked with First Interstate Bank of Oregon for nine years before moving to Seattle in 1988 to work for Washington Mutual Bank, where he is vice president and manager of marketing.

Jim serves on the boards of directors of the Northwest AIDS Foundation and Seattle Counseling Service, is president of the Puget Sound Chapter of the Bank Administration Institute, and serves on various committees for the Seattle Men's Chorus, United Way, and the Greater Seattle Business Association.

Felix is the son of Elba Ramirez of the Bronx, N.Y., and Jenaro Marcial of Aguadilla, Puerto Rico. He earned a bachelor's degree in biology from the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras before graduating from the Ohio State University Dental School. He went on to earn a master's degree in oral medicine from the University of Washington.

He holds a faculty position at Shoreline Community College, is an ad hoc lecturer at the University of Washington, and served in the Public Health Service for three years. He also was a Fellow at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center and recently purchased a private practice on Capitol Hill in Seattle.

The couple will be moving to the Magnolia area of Seattle to a home they are currently renovating. ▼

Sue Hobart, senior features editor for *The Oregonian,* says her paper does not print same-sex wedding announcements because those relationships are not legal. In an earlier interview, George Pyle, editor of the *Salina Journal,* a daily newspaper (circulation: 30,000) in Kansas, called *The Oregonian*'s justification for its exclusionary policy a "smoke screen."

"Since when do newspapers only cover government-sanctioned activities or relationships? That's just an excuse for a newspaper's homophobia," he says. The *Journal* began running gay and lesbian wedding announcements two years ago, after a gay couple came to the paper asking it to do so.

"There was absolutely no question we would do it," says Pyle. "In our editorials we had always argued for equal treatment of gay people. How could we then deny them equality on our own wedding pages?"

The same can be asked of *The Oregonian,* which on its own editorial pages has advocated on behalf of equal treatment for gay men and lesbians. During the Ballot Measure 13 campaign, the newspaper urged voters to reject the anti-gay and -lesbian rights initiative because it would require that "gays be treated differently and less favorably, not equally." And two years ago, *The Oregonian* ran an unprecedented series of editorials urging a "no" vote on Ballot Measure 9.

Editorial page editor Robert Landauer won numerous awards for those editorials (in fact, he has the series framed and displayed in his office), which maintained the estimated 280,000 lesbians and gay men in Oregon were not the "limp-wristed, swish, extravagantly effeminate gay men" nor the "sneering, domineering, deep-voiced, necktie-wearing, hairy-lipped lesbians" the Oregon Citizens Alliance said they were. No, Landauer argued, most lesbians and gay men are "so much like you: civil, modest, fair and constructive in the workplace, at public events and on the playing fields; nurturing as parents. Like you, they are community builders, not wreckers."

Yet even if gay men and lesbians are "so much like you [i.e., heterosexual]" and are the "community builders" *The Oregonian* claims they are, the newspaper certainly is not treating them equally.

"We print wedding announcements as a community service," says Hobart. "We do this for members of the community who want to share important information about their lives." When asked if this community service is only available to heterosexual members of the community, Hobart replied, "That's right."

The Liebertz-Marcial rejection is not an isolated case. (Hobart first told us *The Oregonian* receives requests to print same-sex announcements "regularly," but quickly switched it to "periodically.") In 1992, Portland resident Dr. Mary Ann Humphrey, author, educator and former cable television host, and her partner of nearly a decade, filled out *The Oregonian*'s required wedding announcement form and sent it in with a photo of their commitment ceremony, which had been officiated by a minister.

"We waited and waited but nothing was printed," says Humphrey. "Finally I called and was told that I shouldn't expect anything to appear because *The Oregonian* won't print gay commitment announcements. I was very upset, but I'm getting older now and have to pick and choose my battles."

In another case, Jocelyn Somers, a Portland attorney, and her partner of more than seven years, Kathleen McNaughton, a real estate agent, hoped to publicly celebrate the birth last year of their son. Like other proud mothers, Somers filled out the paperwork that is circulated among parents after the births of their babies. The form asks who the parents are, as well as information about the newborn. That information is then passed on to various newspapers for public announcement purposes.

"I filled out the form and it included both my name and Kathleen's name. When it appeared in *The Oregonian,* Kathleen's name had been removed. I was livid," says Somers. "I called up and asked what happened. I was told by [*Oregonian* staffer] Jerry Boone that they didn't print information about same-sex couples. I asked him whether they would have printed the information in full if it included a man's name. He said yes. I then asked whether they would have bothered to check to see if that information were factual. He told me no, and said *The Oregonian* automatically printed information if it included a man's name. I said to him, 'So I could have written down that the father was Jerry Boone of Donald Duck and you would have printed it?' He said, 'Yes.' "

Somers, who was still weak from a caesarean section, chose not to pursue the issue, although she remained outraged. "This was supposed to be a happy time for us, and this was making it miserable. I decided not to pursue it, but I am really sorry that I don't have [an *Oregonian*] clipping of my son's birth announcement for his scrapbook. We are proud of our relationship and we wanted to share the news about our son's birth with the whole community, yet *The Oregonian* forced us into silence."

Somers says the announcement did run intact in the *Beaverton Valley Times* (circulation: 7,200), another weekly newspaper published by Times Publications.

Liebertz, a Portland State University graduate who worked at First Interstate Bank of Oregon for nine years before moving to Seattle in 1988, adds: "Saying I was disappointed is an understatement. This was the most important day of my life.... My mother has clippings of all my other siblings' wedding announcements, and now there's this gaping hole where mine should have been."

For her part, *Oregonian* editor Sandra Rowe says, "As society changes, so do newspapers. Maybe we should take a look at this whole issue, but I'm not going to predict when or if there will be any changes."

The *Times'* Kelly says his paper has received about a dozen calls from readers protesting the inclusion of a gay couple in its wedding section; a half dozen readers canceled their subscriptions. One woman even left an anonymous message on Penny and Jerry Liebertz's answering machine saying she was discontinuing her subscription to the *Tigard Times* because of the "vulgar" wedding announcement it printed. Penny responded by writing a letter to the Times thanking the newspaper staff for their open-mindedness.

"A newspaper prints many requests without inquiring as to the type of wedding or commitment ceremony, religious or other," she wrote. "Newspapers do not only print items that meet with one person's approval, or there would be little to print." In addition, two readers called to thank the *Times.*

Kelly says, "We're not being heroic, we're just doing our job." When asked whether the paper will continue to print same-sex announcements, he answers, "Yes, of course."