

local news

Sowing the seeds of tolerance in central Oregon

Beyond the Closet encourages progressives to work together

by Inga Sorensen

It is a metaphor that even Bruce Amsbary admits is a touch cliché. Nonetheless, the 39-year-old Bend resident says it aptly sums up the work he is involved with in central Oregon.

"The goal of Beyond the Closet is to, in essence, plant the seeds of understanding and work the soil so one day society can reap a bounty that is grown from trust and respect," he says.

It's not surprising that Amsbary, who last summer launched Beyond the Closet, Inc., a Bend-based gay and lesbian group that strives to support sexual minorities and create bridges of understanding, would look to Mother Earth for inspiration. After all, the self-described "tree hugger" worked for many years as a U.S. Forest Service fire lookout protecting the Pacific Northwest's ancient rain forest; currently he raises funds for the Central Oregon Environmental Center, home to several environmental organizations.

"Beyond the Closet is looking to create a long-term strategy when it comes to gay and lesbian rights," says Amsbary. "We don't want to just handle the brush fires of campaigns that pop up here and there." Instead of simply stamping out those brush fires, which are typically sparked by the anti-gay and -lesbian Oregon Citizens Alliance, Amsbary came up with the idea of Beyond the Closet.

"There's a lot of internal homophobia here in central Oregon. People generally haven't been very out. It's only really been since Ballot Measure 9 that people have started getting active," explains Amsbary, who is also the state coordinator for the Human Rights Campaign Fund's Federal Advocacy Network, a grass-roots campaign designed to influence gay, lesbian and HIV public policy matters at a federal level. "It seemed like central Oregon was lacking a visible and accessible gay and lesbian rights group, and it seemed to me that it was time to change that."

Launching such a project may not seem daunting to citizens living in large metropolitan areas, oftentimes in such areas there is a support network of individuals and organizations already in place. The same cannot be said of many small-town and rural communities. Bend, until very recently, was a sleepy little city. During the past few years its population has begun to blossom as new residents, many fleeing California, flock to the central Oregon enclave known for its winter skiing and comfortable summer climate.

"Like Beyond the Closet, Bend is a small but growing entity. We view this as a tremendous opportunity to grow with the entire community and become an important part of it," says Amsbary, who lives with his partner, Michael McLaughlin,

a nursing student.

One of the group's most visible projects thus far has been its "Illuminating Intolerance" speakers' forum, which brought to central Oregon many well-known gay and lesbian rights activists including openly gay Christian author Mel White, former HRCF executive director Tim McFeeley, and civil rights activists Kathleen Saadat and Suzanne Pharr.

Amsbary estimates that 1,000 people turned out for the series, which ran last fall and included screenings of *Ballot Measure 9*, an award-winning documentary highlighting the 1992 campaign over Measure 9, and the traveling photography exhibit "Families, Friends and Neighbors," which depicts sexual minorities living their everyday lives.

Most recently, Beyond the Closet sponsored a three-part community forum titled "Getting to Know You." The forum, which began last month, encouraged sexual minorities and their supporters living in central Oregon to share their concerns and visions about how to build a stronger community in that region.

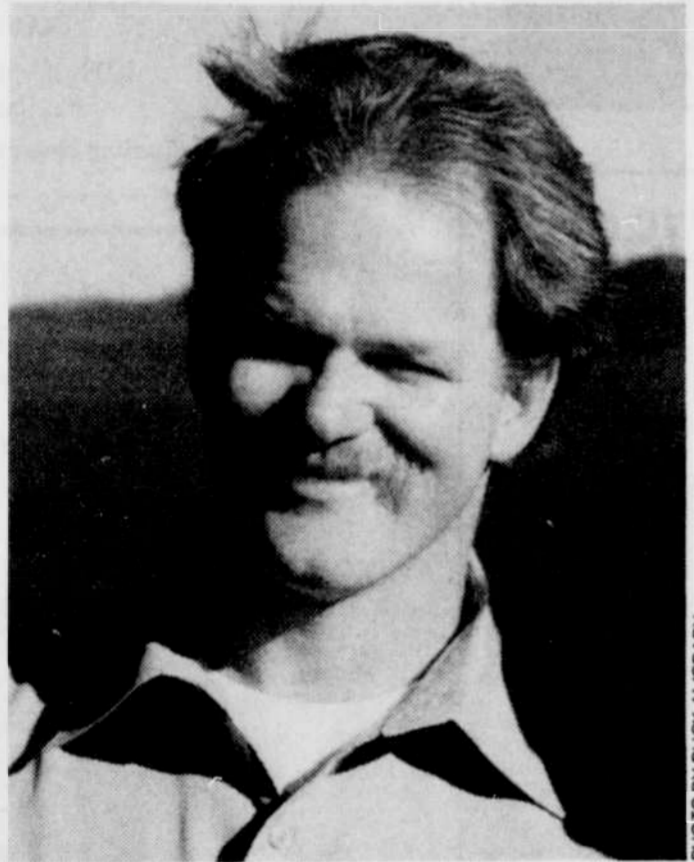
Amsbary estimates about 15 people showed up for the event. Unfazed, he says, "It's a start. These things take time."

Amsbary hopes to create strong alliances with other facets of the progressive community. "It's true that environmentalists and gay rights activists haven't traditionally worked together on their issues, but I think this can change," he says, pointing to the ironic fact that in rural Oregon environmentalists may be more unpopular than gay men and lesbians.

"I've heard people say, 'Listen, you may not want to be associated with environmentalists because it could hurt you and your cause,'" he says, adding he views this reality as an opportunity. "I would love for us to connect with the entire progressive community—young people, environmentalists, gays and lesbians, peace activists—there is so much oppression against minorities and low-income people, against women and gays and lesbians, against the species which are not human. The powers that be want us to fight among each other rather than us banding together."

Amsbary envisions a five-year plan which sees the spawning of a progressive newspaper and perhaps even a gay and lesbian community center. For now, though, the group will work on creating its infrastructure and establishing tax-exempt status. (Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, which represents 2,000 congregations and 17 denominations statewide, is the group's fiscal agent.)

For more information about Beyond the Closet, call (503) 317-8966.



Bruce Amsbary

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