local news

Preserving our past helps create a brighter future

Ceremony kicks off a new project that chronicles the history of the region's sexual minority communities

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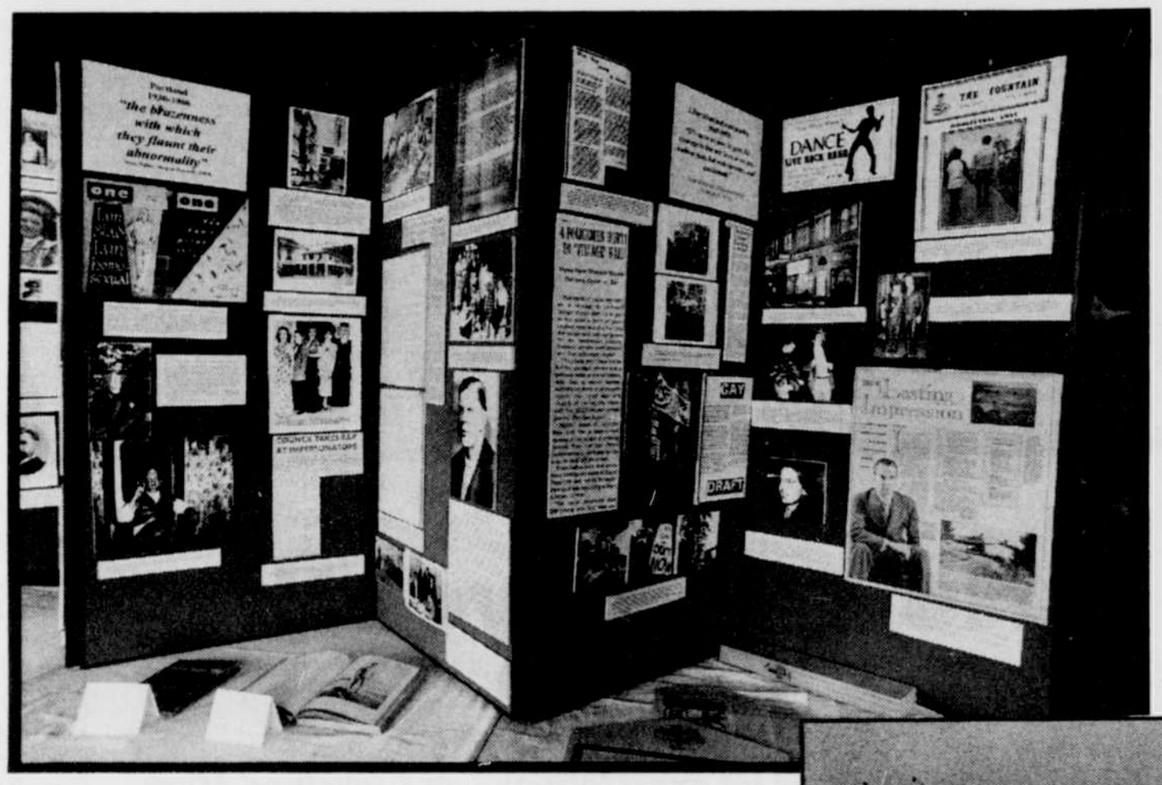
by Inga Sorensen



PHOTOS BY LINDA KLIEWER

Above: items from the archives on display at the ceremony; below: Holly Hart (left center) and John Wilkinson (right center) help mount the plaque

Activism can have its payoffs, not only politically but personally as well. John Wilkinson can certainly attest to that.

The 47-year-old engineer and his partner will soon celebrate their 25th anniversary. The couple met a quarter of a century ago during the second gathering of the Portland Gay Liberation Front, a now-long-defunct gay and lesbian rights group that is considered by some to be the city's first political organization dedicated specifically to gay and lesbian rights and visibility.

"It's fun to look back and think about some of the things we did," says Wilkinson, who now lives in Seattle and works for Kodak. "And it's great to see how far we've come since then."

Wilkinson and Holly Hart, owner of the popular Portland eatery Old Wives' Tales, were honored March 13 for their involvement in the Rose City's early gay and lesbian rights movement. The ceremony, which was sponsored by the Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest in cooperation with the Oregon Historical Society, was held at LaLuna nightclub, which was formerly the Centenary Wilbur Methodist Church, site of the first meeting of the Portland Gay Liberation Front in March 1970.

"The historic Stonewall riots took place in June 1969 in New York. It seemed to take months for the effect of that event to ripple across the country," explains Portland resident Tom Cook, a historian who is a member of the newly founded Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, a group that collects and preserves materials chronicling the experiences of gay men and lesbians throughout the region.

"As far as we can tell, March 1970 was the first time in Portland that a political group came together to work exclusively for gay rights. There were other groups in existence, but they were social and charitable organizations," he says.

According to Cook, Wilkinson and Hart were initially involved with the *Willamette Bridge*, an underground newspaper that was born out of opposition to the Vietnam conflict. Cook says Wilkinson had been a college student at the University of Washington before journeying to Portland to assist friends with the then-fledging KBOO community radio station. Hart, meanwhile, was a student from Berkeley, Calif., who landed in Portland after she transferred to Reed College.

"In December of 1969, the *Willamette Bridge* ran an article by a gay anti-war activist named David McReynolds. It was the first mention of Stonewall in that paper," says Cook. "John, who was doing some layout for the paper—and was struggling with his sexual identity at the time—was very influenced by the article."

According to Cook, the following month the newspaper received a personals-style advertisement from a young gay man. The advertisement, which was signed "Gay, young and lonely," was refused because the paper's staff considered it an advertisement for sex.

Cook says, "Wilkinson was quick to realize that the young man was like himself, not searching for sex as much as he was reaching out to find others like himself." Wilkinson eventually became more comfortable with his identity and began writing pieces about what it was like to be gay. Unlike many lesbians and gay men of that time who lived their lives under a cloak of anonymity, Wilkinson signed his name to the articles.

Wilkinson took it a step further when he placed an ad calling upon gay men and lesbians to come together and form a political action group. Thus was the beginning of the Portland Gay Liberation Front.

According to Cook, during the group's short-lived existence (it lasted about a year and a half), members lobbied against state sodomy prohibitions and picketed the premiere of the film *The Boys in the Band*, which depicts a group of gay men as losers who revel in hedonism yet drown in a sea of unhappiness.

"The [Portland Gay Liberation Front] didn't last all that long, but we credit them with getting things going," says Cook. "Hart was the first woman to really become active in the group. For a while she was the only one, but she, too, started writing pieces urging women to get involved in gay liberation." Cook says more women eventually joined, and they formed what could be viewed as the female arm of the group; it is reported that as many as 100 women attended the meetings each week.

Not surprisingly, both Wilkinson and Hart went on to work for gay and lesbian causes. Cook says Hart, who became a lawyer, served on a statewide task force on gay and lesbian issues in the late 1970s; Wilkinson was instrumental in getting the City of Seattle to approve a domestic partnership ordinance in the early 1990s.

"Political activism made the difference," says Wilkinson, "but what I think really changes things is people coming out. If people were still afraid to come out of the closet, we wouldn't have made the progress we have."

During the ceremony, a plaque commemorating the Portland Gay Liberation Front's first meeting was placed at the church-turned-alternative nightclub. "The owners of LaLuna think it's great. After all, they do host a Queer Night every Monday night," says Cook, who adds the event marked the official kick-off of the Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest.

"We think it's vital we preserve as much of our community's heritage as possible," he says. "We have been overlooked and ignored by historians and society in general for so long. It's time to see that change."

Anyone interested in becoming involved in the project can write to: Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, PO Box 3646, Portland, OR 97208-3646, or call 284-1872.

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