

local news

It's official

October is proclaimed Lesbian and Gay History Month in Oregon, thanks largely to the efforts of a proud parent

by Inga Sorensen

When Flo Olkoski, a 73-year-old retired bookkeeper, gets an idea in her head, watch out.

"I had learned that two states [Massachusetts and Connecticut] had issued proclamations acknowledging and celebrating Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual History Month," explains the Salem resident, who moved to Oregon two years ago with her husband, Ted, after spending the previous 45 years in Florida. "I remember that I had been impressed with [Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber's] campaign literature. It seemed very inclusive of gays and lesbians, so I was hoping he would be supportive of this idea."

Olkoski's plan was to persuade Kitzhaber to issue his own proclamation declaring October Lesbian and Gay History Month in Oregon.

"I called his office to see what needed to be done. They told me to send in a draft, which I wrote up using the [other gubernatorial] proclamations as models. My husband and I dropped it off at the governor's office," she recounts. "A few weeks went by and we hadn't heard anything, and we were starting to get worried, then a copy of the proclamation showed up in the mail. It was a wonderful feeling."

The proclamation, which was issued July 11, reads, in part: "[Whereas] gay and lesbian people have made many important contributions to society; [and whereas] nine states have already banned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation; [and whereas] the Kitzhaber administration is committed to fairness and the recognition of the full rights and responsibilities of citizenship and contributions of all Oregonians; [and whereas] Oregon voters have affirmed their commitment to these principles and have made history by electing five openly gay and lesbian legislators to the state legislature... I hereby proclaim October 1995 to be Lesbian and Gay History Month in Oregon and encourage all of our citizens to join in this observance."

Last year, a nationwide grass-roots network of teachers and community members, headed up by the New York City-based Gay, Lesbian and Straight Teachers Network, began working to have October recognized as Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual History Month. The governors of Massachusetts and Connecticut, as well as the mayors of Chicago and Boston, issued proclamations to celebrate the inaugural event.

"I just took what they said and geared it more toward Oregon, like the line about the five openly

gay and lesbian lawmakers. That's very unique to Oregon and very impressive," says Olkoski, who has a long history of social activism, including her work with Common Cause (she sits on the state board).

Though she has a lesbian daughter who still lives in Florida, Olkoski had not previously been involved in sexual minority rights issues. (Olkoski marched in her first Lesbian and Gay Pride parade during Portland's celebration in June. "Every time I think of it tears come to my eyes," she says.)

"My daughter sent me some GLSTN information which was extremely useful," says Olkoski, adding proudly, "I have a very smart daughter."

Before submitting the final draft to Kitzhaber's office, Olkoski asked Ron Schlittler, an openly gay legislative aide to state Sen. Pete Sorenson (D-Eugene) to review the text.

"I had met Flo previously when she had come to the Capitol to lobby. When she informed me what she was doing I thought it was terrific," says Schlittler, who included in the proclamation the line: "[T]he Kitzhaber administration is committed to fairness and the recognition of the full rights and responsibilities of citizenship and contributions of all Oregonians..."

He says, "There's still a widespread perception that it's already illegal to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. I think the statement that the administration is dedicated to the recognition of full rights highlights that this isn't yet a reality," says Schlittler. "I also thought it was vital to include the word 'responsibilities.' In the discourse over civil rights, there seems to be so much focus on rights as opposed to responsibilities. If people thought about it more in those terms, I think they'd be more supportive."

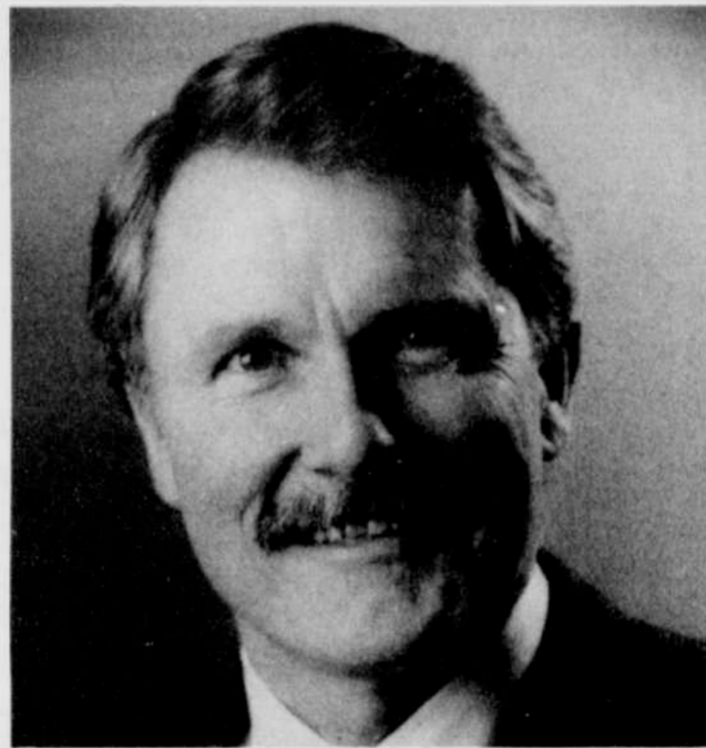
"The governor issues proclamations primarily to create good will," says Kitzhaber spokesman John Cony. "This proclamation is a very even-keeled statement about respecting the rights of all

people. It's a fairly benign statement and it hasn't created any type of a stir."

Tom Cook is the founder of the Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, which researches and gathers documentation relating to gay and lesbian history in the region. He believes the proclamation has indeed created good will. "I think the most important thing about this is that you have the governor publicizing the fact that gays and lesbians in Oregon have made contributions to the betterment of the entire state."

Cook says his group is in the process of organizing commemorative activities, and recently released a list of "10 gay and lesbian Oregonians who made history" which it plans to distribute to local newspapers.

The list includes: popular cooking author James Beard, who was born and raised in Portland; architect and conservationist John Yeon; journalist Randy Shilts, author of the critically acclaimed *And the Band Played On* (Shilts graduated from



John Kitzhaber

the University of Oregon in the early 1970s); and Gale Wilhelm, a lesbian novelist who was born in Eugene in 1908. According to Cook, Wilhelm wrote *We Too Are Drifting* and *Torchlight to Valhalla*, which are generally considered to be the first lesbian-themed novels in U.S. literature.

According to Cook, the U.S. Postal Service will release a 32-cent stamp on Oct. 12 which honors deceased gay playwright Tennessee Williams.

"The day has finally come when we as a nation begin to acknowledge the contributions of gays and lesbians," says Cook.

Even with the gains, there remain efforts to distort the place of gay men and lesbians in history. Most recently, Oregon Citizens Alliance official Scott Lively published a book entitled *The Pink Swastika: Homosexuality in the Nazi Party*, in which Lively claims that "homosexuality was the

central element of the fascist system" and that "the people most responsible for many Nazi atrocities were homosexual."

The book is published by none other than Lively Communications, and Lively has sent a solicitation letter telling people they can receive a copy of the book for free if they make a "tax deductible donation to support the Lively family while Scott goes through law school."

According to the letter, "Scott has been accepted at Simon Greenleaf School of Law to begin classes this fall. Simon Greenleaf is a Christian law school dedicated to promoting Christian values in American culture."

Lively and his wife, Anne, finish the missive with: "[W]e hope you will read and enjoy *The Pink Swastika*. As the controversy over this book heats up (as we know it will) you will have inside knowledge about the issue and will be empowered to discuss it with authority."

"Lively's book places him in the historical revisionist movement because he is attempting to shift our thinking about history, in this case, about who started the Holocaust," explains Steve Gardner, research director for the Coalition for Human Dignity, which monitors right-wing and white supremacist activities nationwide. "He may not have a large following, but by publishing this book he is muddying the waters. These types of works can prompt more credible historians to re-examine historical questions."

He adds, "Others will think that it's so astonishing Lively would say these things that there must be some truth to his statements. The best thing for us to do is to prepare careful responses. We can't ignore this."

Schlittler offered his own response in a recent letter to *The Oregonian*, where he readily admits there were gays in the Nazi Party but adds: "My only gripe is with Lively's unwillingness to report that homosexuals also fought and died side by side with their heterosexual brothers and sisters to put a stop to Hitler's madness." Schlittler provided examples of positive contributions made by gay men and lesbians during World War II, including that of Alan Turing, a gay British mathematician who developed a machine which shattered the Nazi submarine code, a key turning point in the war.

"Lively distorts by only providing a tiny slice of gay history. It's up to us to provide the truth," he says.

A presentation entitled "Out of the Past, Celebrating Gay and Lesbian History" will be held Oct. 8 at the Unitarian-Universalist Congregation, 490 19th St. NE, in Salem. The event is free and will be held during the 9:30 am and 11:30 am services.

For information about Oregon Lesbian and Gay History Month events, contact the Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest at 284-1872.

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