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local news

Proposal stirs emotions

Bend groups' proposal to have Gay and Lesbian History Month observed is rescinded in the spirit of community harmony

by Inga Sorensen

It could have been a public relations disaster. Or it could have created bad feelings. But gay and lesbian rights advocates in Central Oregon say they were able to wiggle out of a tight spot while leaving positive sentiments—and generating a little public education.

"It was never our intention for this to create controversy," says Bruce Amsbary, president of Beyond the Closet Inc., a Bend-based organization working toward lesbian and gay visibility and civil rights.

Beyond the Closet and the Bend chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays led a drive last month to get the Bend City Council to affirm Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber's proclamation declaring October Lesbian and Gay History Month. Several groups, including the Deschutes County Hispanic Advocacy Council and Central Oregon Battering and Rape Alliance, issued letters in support of the proclamation, while the Bend Ministerial Association opposed the proposal.

"We thought it was a good way to make the public aware that this was Lesbian and Gay History Month," says Amsbary. "I approached [Bend city Councilor] Bryan Chitwood and asked him if he would sponsor the [proclamation request]. He said sure, that it would be no big deal. We thought it would make it through the City Council without any problem."

However, two days before the vote the city's daily newspaper, *The Bulletin*, ran a story on the front page of its Metro section headlined "Council faces gay-rights dilemma."

In that article, Chitwood and Bend Mayor Steve Stenkamp signal their support for the proclamation, but four councilors—a majority of the seven-member City Council—expressed discomfort with the request.

(According to *The Bulletin*, the Bend City Council has pulled back from issuing proclamations since a "Great America MeatOut" endorsement sparked the wrath of beef producers two years ago.)

Councilor Deborah Hogan is quoted as saying "to make a proclamation as a representative of the City of Bend [might] be interpreted as [an] endorsement of one particular lifestyle.... I don't think that's an appropriate role for us."

Councilor Jim Young added that he was edgy about having the city take a formal stand on a controversial issue, while Councilor Suzanne Johannsen reportedly suggested that Beyond the Closet and P-FLAG change the declaration's wording to emphasize diversity and teaching tolerance rather than focusing specifically of gay and lesbian issues. (The change was rejected.)

According to Amsbary, the *Bulletin* story spawned a local media feeding frenzy, which prompted extensive television and radio coverage. In fact, the day of the scheduled vote (Sept. 20),

Amsbary debated Oregon Citizens Alliance chairman Lon Mabon on a local radio show.

And not surprisingly, all the media attention generated a response from the public.

"The mayor's office and city councilors were deluged with calls. The mayor got so many calls that his answering machine broke," says Amsbary. "Callers were saying things like why don't we have a heterosexual history month or a special month for murderers. It was pretty ugly."

Concerned about the dissension, Beyond the Closet and P-FLAG held a brainstorming session the morning of the vote to ponder how to best handle the situation.

"We didn't want to put the city councilors in an uncomfortable spot, but we also did not want to be seen as backing down," says Amsbary. "About half of us wanted to withdraw the request and the other half wanted to forge ahead."

Amsbary polled his organization's board members. "A very good suggestion that we got from [board member] LaVerne Lewis was that we not blame the City Council for any action it may take. She felt it was important that we shift the emphasis to the community as a whole," he says, "and to remember that the

entire community needed to be educated."

"I felt it was important to remember that any action city councilors would take would reflect the will of their constituents," says Lewis, who is executive director of the Portland-based Lesbian Community Project. "That's their job. At the same time, I said it was our obligation to help educate the public."

Proclamation backers ultimately decided to pull their request to the City Council. Instead, they issued a statement which was read at the meeting where the vote was to have occurred. Chitwood, who had agreed to sponsor the measure, read the statement.

"We look forward to the day when the history and accomplishments of all minority groups are so well known and recognized that the proclamation of a special month to highlight their history and contributions will no longer be necessary," proclamation supporters said in the statement. They also stressed that they withdrew their request in order to "enhance community harmony."


"We achieved what we had originally set out to do, which was to get some public attention about Lesbian and Gay History Month. This wasn't the way we had initially intended things to go, but that's the way it is," says Amsbary.

For more information about *Beyond the Closet*, write to PO Box 9174, Bend, OR 97708; or call 317-8966. To find out more about P-FLAG of Bend, call 317-2334.



Bruce Amsbary

PHOTO BY SHAWN McENANCY



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