

It's a good thing Vickie Williams has a large house: four bedrooms, three baths, three decks and a big family room, to be exact. She's also blessed with the gifts of a chef and the good will of an ambassador.

"I'll probably make baked salmon and of course some good old-fashioned soul food—casseroles, barbecued pork, corn bread, baked beans," says Williams, who will tell you she's "been gay for more than 30 years."

"Some people call me a veteran homosexual," laughs the spirited 44-year-old, who recently opened her digs to dozens of sisters—i.e. lesbian friends of African descent—for a Super Bowl bash that featured bountiful food, high-quality company, games for children and grown-ups alike, and, oh yeah, a smattering of football, too.

"Last Super Bowl we had a half-time show with some dancers," recounts Williams, a shuttle driver who can sometimes be spotted carting clients to and from Seattle International Airport via her Lincoln Town Car.

American men. Brother to Brother has affiliates in Seattle, Portland and other cities nationwide.

"Seattle isn't like San Francisco or Los Angeles," says Sistah 2 Sistah co-founder Sheila Robinson, a 49-year-old lifelong Washingtonian. "There really wasn't a place to go and meet other lesbians of African descent. You might see somebody on the street once in awhile, or at an occasional event, but that would be it."

So three years ago while brunching at a Capitol Hill bistro, Robinson and four female companions—including her partner of five years, Paulette Payne—vowed to take action.

"We had been talking to one of the brothers, and he got us all fired up about doing a group for sisters," she says.

"Each of us agreed to get 10 women apiece for a social function," adds Payne, now 37.

The duo estimate that as many as 60 women turned out for that first-ever soiree, which was held at the couple's home.

"It was incredible. All I could think was:

end, POCAAN seeks to curtail people's sense of alienation and reconnect them to their communities. Brother to Brother/Seattle, which was founded in 1990-91, was already located in POCAAN's space. POCAAN acts as a fiscal agent for both organizations.

While Brother to Brother/Seattle was established primarily as a response to the expanding health crisis, Sistah 2 Sistah, says Robinson, was prompted by the desire of sexual minority women of African descent to build a sense of solidarity and connection among each other largely through social channels. In the Pacific Northwest, where the African American population is relatively small, that feeling of union may be all the more momentous to many women.

"I tried to get involved in some of the existing lesbian and gay groups, like the [Greater Seattle Business Association and the Lesbian Resource Center]," says Payne, who works full time in the retail industry while simultaneously completing her college degree. "But when I've gone, I've

As backers of anti-gay-rights initiatives in Washington attempted to garner support, members of Sistah 2 Sistah's civic committee responded by approaching the broader African American community in an effort to educate it about the discriminatory measures and homophobia.

Robinson also says that during a local Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration last year, Sistah 2 Sistah members were invited to speak, marking what she believes is the first time an openly gay or lesbian group was asked to do so.

"Not only are the sisters here for each other," she says, "we're also here to talk with straight sisters and brothers about homophobia."

Sistah 2 Sistah meetings are specifically for sexual minority women of African descent, but the group's social functions are open; on a few occasions, Brother to Brother/Seattle and Sistah 2 Sistah have co-sponsored events.

Payne says she had one of her most rewarding Sistah 2 Sistah experiences in December, when she helped organize a poetry reading/food drive

GETTING TOGETHER

SISTAH 2 SISTAH, BROTHER TO BROTHER: CREATING FELLOWSHIP IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

by Inga Sorensen



Six-Up-Uptown by Annie Lee

"I've got a couple of college degrees—in education and marketing/management—but I really enjoy the freedom of driving," she says.

She also savors socializing, traveling and cooking each week for her younger sister's ministry—Azusa Mission—which provides food and guidance to the homeless in the Seattle area. "I love it all. I love being involved. I love helping out. I love getting together with other women," she says.

Williams' sentiments embody the philosophic underpinnings of Sistah 2 Sistah, a Seattle-based organization formed in 1993 for lesbian, bisexual and transgendered women of African descent. The group's creation was inspired largely by Brother to Brother—an organization that, in part, strives to empower gay and bisexual African

"Where did these beautiful sisters come from?" laughs Robinson. Hours of excited chatting, eating and card-playing ensued. Not surprisingly, many women were eager to do it again.

"And it kept getting bigger and bigger, and our gatherings and meetings lasted well into the night," she says. "Finally, we decided we had to do something."

That "something" entailed moving Sistah 2 Sistah into an office space supplied by the People of Color Against AIDS Network, which was founded in 1987 for the express purpose of responding to a pandemic that was taking a dramatic toll on communities of color.

POCAAN's mission is to create a comprehensive, multicultural AIDS prevention model that is responsive to communities of color. Toward that

been the only African American person there. I'm not saying that they were bad experiences...they were what they were."

Robinson adds: "Sometimes you'd go out to a disco, and the music wouldn't be quite right, or there wouldn't be many sisters there... Sistah 2 Sistah has changed a lot of that for us."

Over the years Sistah 2 Sistah has held dinners, parties, dances, poetry reading/food drives, and seminars addressing topics such as finances, health care and safer sex. The group's mailing list has ballooned to nearly 200, and it regularly publishes a newsletter. A handful of committees have been formed, including a social committee, civic committee and a board. A more informal group for Sistahs who are 40-plus has also been organized.

to assist women living with HIV and AIDS and their families.

"Why did I choose a poetry reading?" she says, echoing my question. "Well, there have been lots of times when I've been talking with sisters, and for some reason, they wind up reading me something they wrote."

"And it's always so good," she continues. "I tell them, 'You should do something with that.'"

Instead it was Payne who organized the forum where her friends—and some professional writers

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and instructors—verbally unveiled their poetic wares, while at the same time assisting women with HIV and AIDS. The event also gave Sistah 2 Sistah greater exposure in the African American community.

"We held the poetry reading at Mecca International," says Payne, adding that the fairly new establishment, which is geared toward the African American community, is "owned by two straight brothers."

"I liked the feel of the place," she says. "It was spacious. It was a comfortable space, and they were really nice. I thought it would be great to have the reading there."

So Payne approached the owners, who appeared willing.

"Then I told them: 'Look, you need to know who's going to be there.' One of the brothers looked at me and said, 'I can tell by looking at you that anything you say is going to be cool.' So I told him about Sistah 2 Sistah, and it was cool," she laughs.

Says Robinson: "There's nothing like that sense of fellowship."

Williams, meanwhile, says she enjoys her role as a "veteran" lesbian. "Anything I can do to help any sister—particularly around the gay life—I'm there."

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