

Honing a vision

Residents of Southern Oregon seek to build a community where hate can't grow

by Inga Sorensen

What [kind of place] do we want our region to be?" asks Rabbi Marc Sirinsky of Ashland's Temple Emek Shalom.

He isn't seeking an on-the-spot answer. Instead, he hopes that residents of Southern Oregon will seriously mull that question over during the upcoming weeks.

"Perhaps we will hold an umbrella rally that answers that question. Hopefully it will be proactive, rather than a response to a particular incident," he says.

Sirinsky, like many other human rights advocates, is concerned about a series of disturbing events that have occurred lately in Southern Oregon, including the highly publicized December murders of Roxanne Ellis and Michelle Abdill, a Medford lesbian couple, and the alleged harassment in January of the Golds, a Jewish family in Wimer. Federal and local law enforcement officials are investigating anti-Semitic vandalism that occurred at the Jackson County home of James and Anne Gold. In one vandalistic act, a crude swastika was spray-painted on their property.

In response to both the Abdill-Ellis and Gold cases, Medford Mayor Jerry Lausmann—whom many activists considered to be highly conservative—offered reward money and declared his city a hate-free zone.

On Feb. 8, meanwhile, the Rogue River City Council and Mayor Dennis Hitch adopted a resolution calling for all area residents to "unite" and "band together... against hate crimes."

The resolution further stated that no one should rest until the perpetrators of hate crimes are brought to justice. The resolution, say Rogue River officials, was in response to the Gold incident.

"I think the response has been very positive—from the peace community to the religious community to government," says Sirinsky. "Every-one should be concerned about hate crimes."

With that said, Sirinsky hopes that the overall community can work toward creating a more tolerant environment, rather than simply reacting every time a hate incident occurs.

Jim Willeford of Southern Oregon Men's Outreach, a social network for gay and bisexual men in Southern Oregon, thinks that's a sensible approach.

"I know that we didn't want to rush to judgment [in the Gold case] because it would have been perceived as 'Look at the gays and liberals from Ashland and Medford coming here and doing this,'" explains Willeford. "It's important for people in the local community to take the lead. At the same time, we shouldn't turn our backs on a possible hate crime either."

He adds, "I think it would be good to take some time to build up a broad-based coalition and really begin to put an infrastructure in place."

Willeford and Sirinsky say community gatherings are a good way to do that. In fact, the night the Rogue River City Council passed its resolution, a community screening of the video *Not in Our Town* was held in the Medford-Ashland vicinity.

The documentary, which recently aired on public television stations nationwide, tells

the story of how residents in Billings, Mont., responded to white supremacists when hate incidents were escalating in their community three years ago.

The *Not in Our Town* video has been touted as an effective organizing tool to encourage average citizens to get involved in the effort to combat hate crimes and harassment spawned from prejudice.

"Perhaps we can give one another the skills to deal with anger and intolerance," says Sirinsky. "Maybe we can start to do that now."

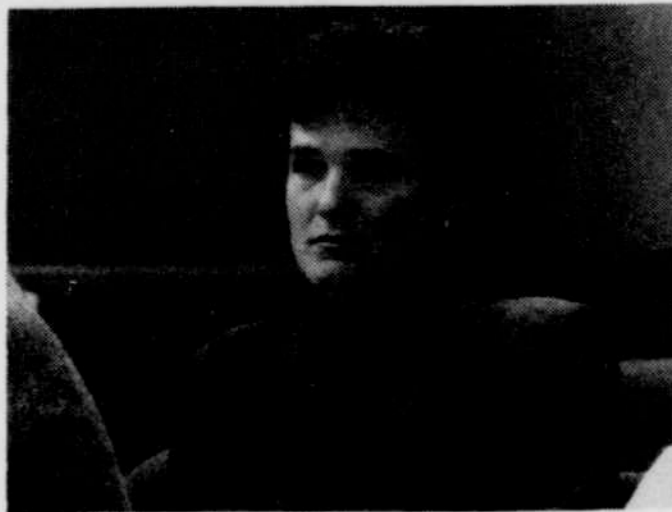
Willeford adds: "Maybe we can come up with a model, rather than just acting in a knee-jerk way.... We're still sorting it all out."

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RTP issues early endorsements

Right to Privacy Political Action Committee has issued early endorsements in three political contests.

RTP PAC, Oregon's largest lesbian, gay and



Gail Shibley

bisexual rights group, has endorsed state Rep. Gail Shibley (D-Portland), Frank Dixon and Bob Duehmig. Shibley is running for an open, nonpartisan seat on the Portland City Council. Dixon, a

Democrat, is seeking election to the Oregon Senate representing District 6. A retired major in the U.S. Army Reserves, Dixon is a consumer attorney and has been highly involved in Portland's neighborhood association network for more than a decade. Duehmig, also a Democrat, is running for the state House District 12 seat being vacated by Shibley. He is a legislative specialist with the

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Oregon Federation of Teachers, Education and Health Professionals, and was the group's chief lobbyist during the 1993 and 1995 legislative sessions.

All are openly gay; Shibley became Oregon's first openly gay or lesbian lawmaker in 1991. Each faces a May 21 primary.

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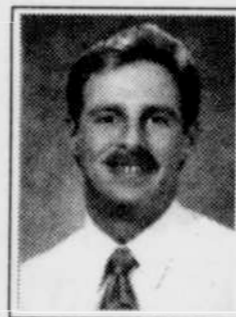
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