

RADICAL SENSUALISTS



Susie Shepherd and K.T. Chase at home with their dog Bobo

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fantasy. There is no hard-core definition."

There is, however, an international network of like-minded people who advocate for the rights of adults to engage freely in "safe, sane and consensual" expression, sexual or otherwise.

Rose, Chase and Shepherd are proud and active members of that movement, which has evolved during the past two-plus decades.

According to archival and anecdotal sources, widespread organized gay leather life does not appear to have existed before the late 1960s and early 1970s, though leather bars in major urban settings such as New York City, Chicago and San Francisco operated and attracted adherents now commonly referred to as the Old Guard—buff and tough leathermen who gave orders and expected all of their demands to be met.

Such leather/SM establishments in the Pacific Northwest have never really taken root.

"But there was a Portland bar in the 1970s called The Other Inn. It was kind of a leather hang-out," says local historian Tom Cook of the Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, a group that gathers and studies historical materials about the region's queer culture.

"There was a bartender there named Mama

Bernice," continues Cook. "She was a woman in her 60s who was very popular with a group of leather guys. She collected these little glass bluebird figurines, and she called her group of leathermen her 'Little Bluebirds.'"

Rose, in fact, was introduced to the gay leather community at The Other Inn.

"I began learning more about it and enjoyed the camaraderie," says Rose.

Like many leather/SM enthusiasts, Rose eventually got plugged into a social network that extends far beyond the bar scene: There are local, national and international leather/SM organizations that sponsor innumerable charitable fund-raisers, title contests, educational workshops, retreats and a host of other activities.

The first Mr. International Leather Contest was held in Chicago in 1979; the first Ms International Leather competition was held in 1987 in San Francisco. Judy Tallwing McCarthy, then of Portland, beat out contestants from throughout the country to become the first Ms International Leather. Shepherd followed suit two years later when she was named Ms International Leather 1989.

National Leather Association-International is a group with chapters throughout the United States—including Oregon—as well as Canada and Australia.

Chase currently sits on NLA International's executive council and is its female co-chair. The group

describes itself as "a pansexual (all inclusive: male, female, transgender, straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual), fun-loving, caring, well adjusted, educated, focused and political organization serving our community. [Members] are actively working in our society to reduce prejudices about people's personal choices in life."

NLA International's mission is to in part: "promote with power and pride the right of all adults to engage in safe, sane and consensual sexual expression and fight for decriminalization of all sexual acts between consenting adults."

It is a goal that many would think the broader sexual minorities community would support, particularly in Oregon, where gay men and lesbians have been so vigorously targeted by the Oregon Citizens Alliance.

Yet despite the ingredients for a logical alliance, many lesbians and gay men are quick to condemn those in leather.

"When you say SM or leather there is this knee-jerk reaction," says Rose. "The leather community is viewed as unapproachable. I think that has to do in large part with people's own insecurities, and perhaps their secret fantasies as well."

Some queers may also view the leather/SM/fetish community as a threat to their dreams of

they negotiate safe words, they develop scenes together.... It's all about trust and communication."

According to Rose and Chase, the advent of AIDS heavily influenced changes in leather/SM life.

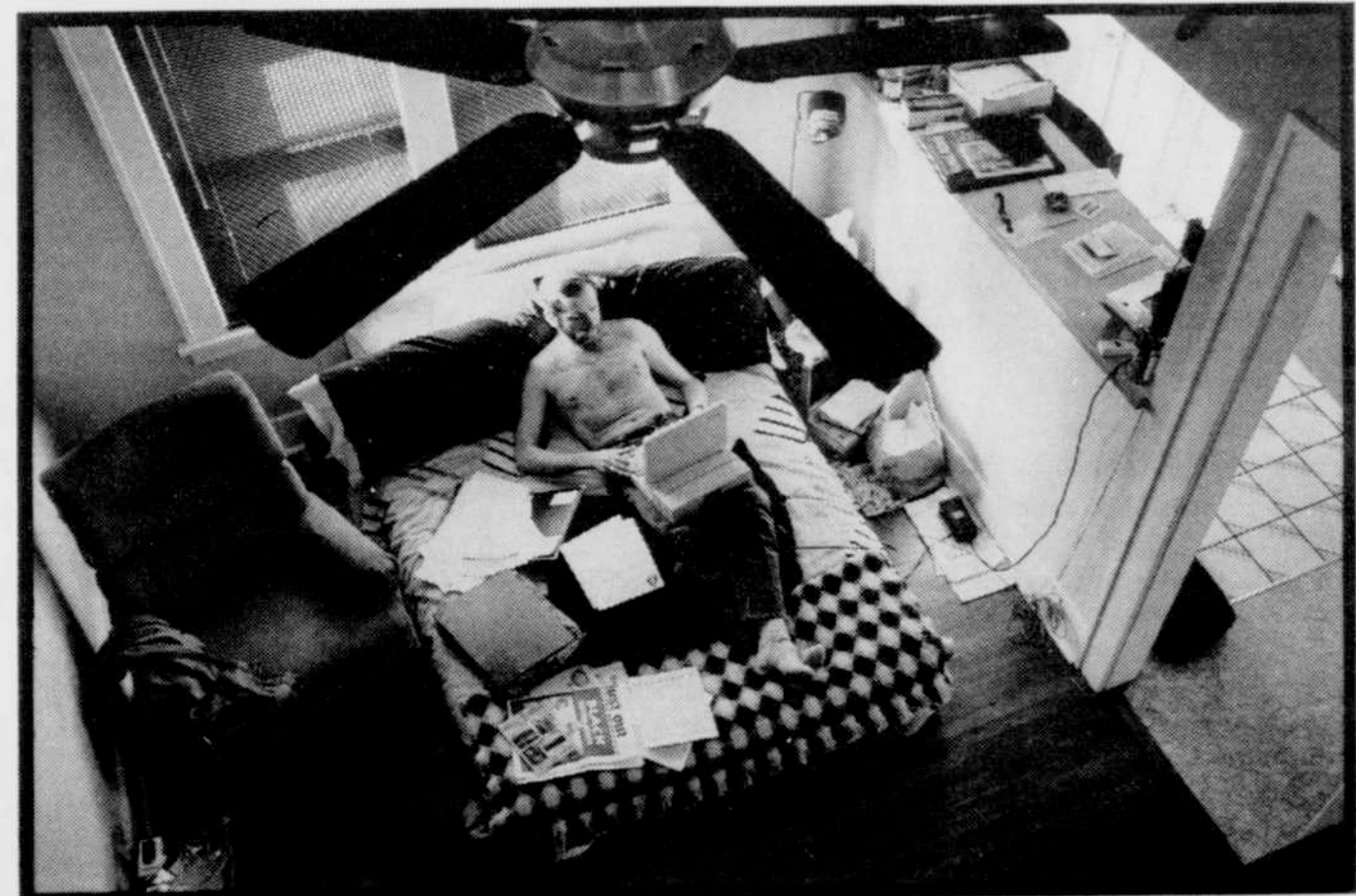
"Back in the 1960s and early '70s, the leather scene was very underground, and there were no ground rules," says Chase. "An Old Guard leatherman could walk into a leather bar and say you're here, you're mine, and proceed to do anything he wanted with the guy."

"AIDS has changed all of that," she continues. "Leathermen were among the earliest to get hit with the disease. So many members of the leather community were dying, they knew they had to do something. I believe it's fair to say that [gay] leathermen were the first to initiate safe sex in an organized fashion."

Ground rules also became *the rule*, and anyone thought to be undermining "safe, sane and consensual" principles was put on notice.

"We're pretty good at policing our own," says Chase, who admits that, like any culture, the leather community has its "bad apples" or "fringe dwellers."

"Those are people who are not really involved in the community and just kind of hover on the fringes," she says. "If someone picks someone up and tries to do nonconsensual things, we try to get the word out



Jeff Rose working at home

assimilation. Additionally, anti-gay groups have done an effective job of creating a wedge in the lesbian and gay community by exploiting drag and leather folk through their propaganda. Just look at the videos promoted by the OCA—drags and leathers are the stars of the let's-scare-the-masses-frightshow.

Leather/SM toys such as nipple clips, leather wrist and ankle restraints, handcuffs, G-strings, studded collars, whips and leashes undoubtedly intimidate some people, as do phrases like "top and bottom," "Mistress and Slave," and "piercing and cutting."

"The biggest misconception about the leather/SM community is that we beat and hurt each other," says Chase, who points a finger of blame at the media, which nearly always depict the leather/SM/fetish lifestyle in a sleazy and deadly light.

From 1980's *Cruising*, which featured Al Pacino as an undercover cop trying to track down a repressed queer psychokiller who cruises the leather bars for victims, to last year's *Pulp Fiction*, which included a seedy, ominous leather/SM scene, Chase says movies perpetuate rancid stereotypes.

"Rent *Exit to Eden*," she recommends. "It's the only movie that has ever come close to showing the way leather/SM is." That's because that film highlights humor, playfulness and consensuality.

"It's a total untruth that [leather/SM] is not consensual. Nothing could be further from the truth," says Rose. "[Leather folk] talk about health status,

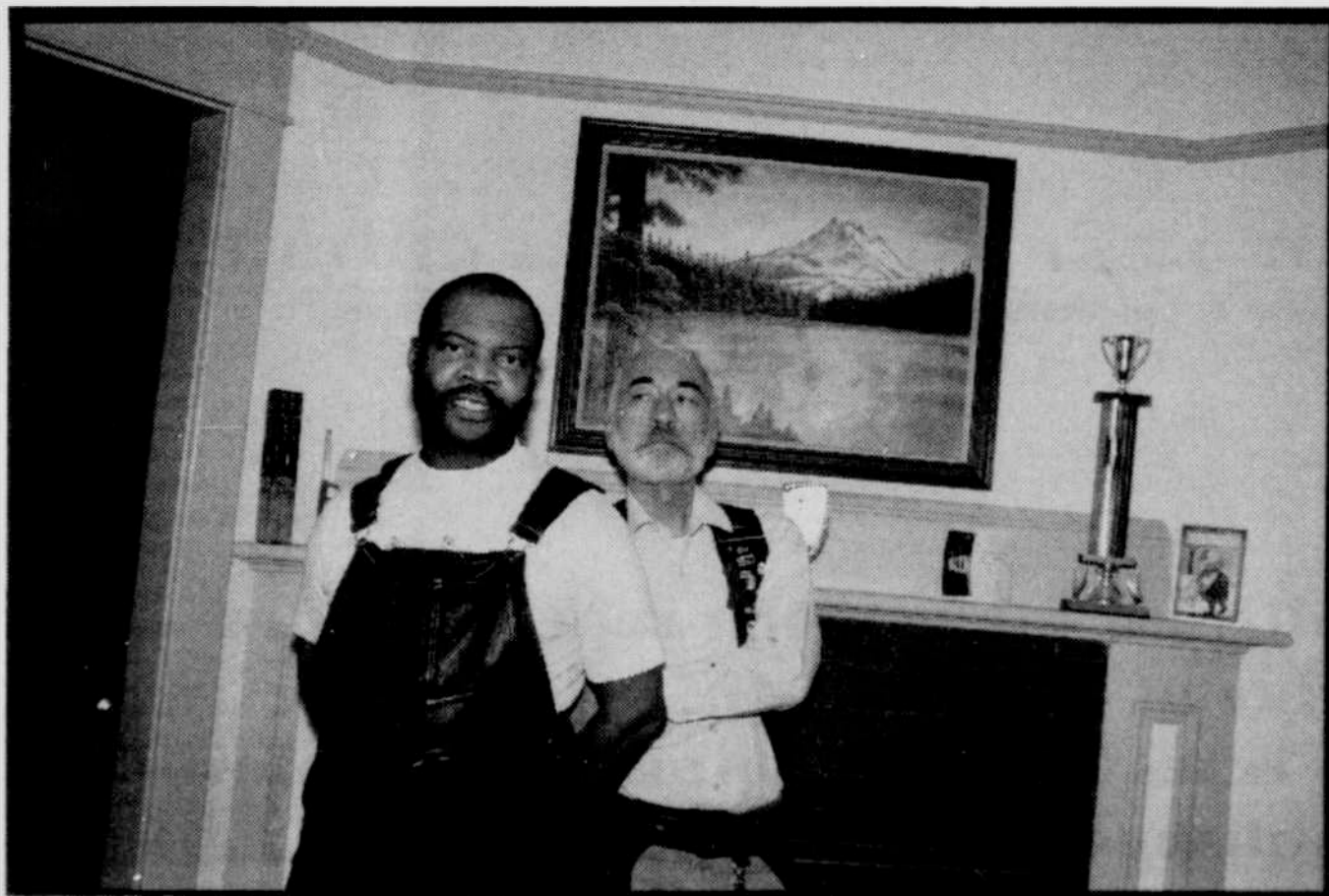
about that person. Luckily those kinds of occurrences are rare."

Some leather/SM/fetish folks say their lifestyle choices have led to purer, more honest personal relationships. A lesbian SM enthusiast called Juicy Lucy talked about that in the 1981 publication *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian SM*:

"I've found that SM has really helped me get rid of a lot of passive-aggressive shit and communication problems. You really learn how to be clear about what you want and that it's all right to want *anything* you want," she writes. "I think a lot of the misunderstandings and not hearing each other and not being brave enough to be honest get burned away in SM.... The main issues are that you talk through openly and make sure you agree, trust each other...agree on a safe word, and get all the pleasure and joy there is between you in that situation. SM is basically about good times."

Yet many radical sensualists, as they are sometimes called, contend that their personal testimony is constantly ignored. Subsequently the myths continue to circulate, precluding any meaningful discussion—and understanding—about the leather/SM/fetish lifestyle.

"I'm more than happy to enlighten people, but



Roland Bynum and his partner, Bill Schmeling, aka The Hun

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