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since 1983

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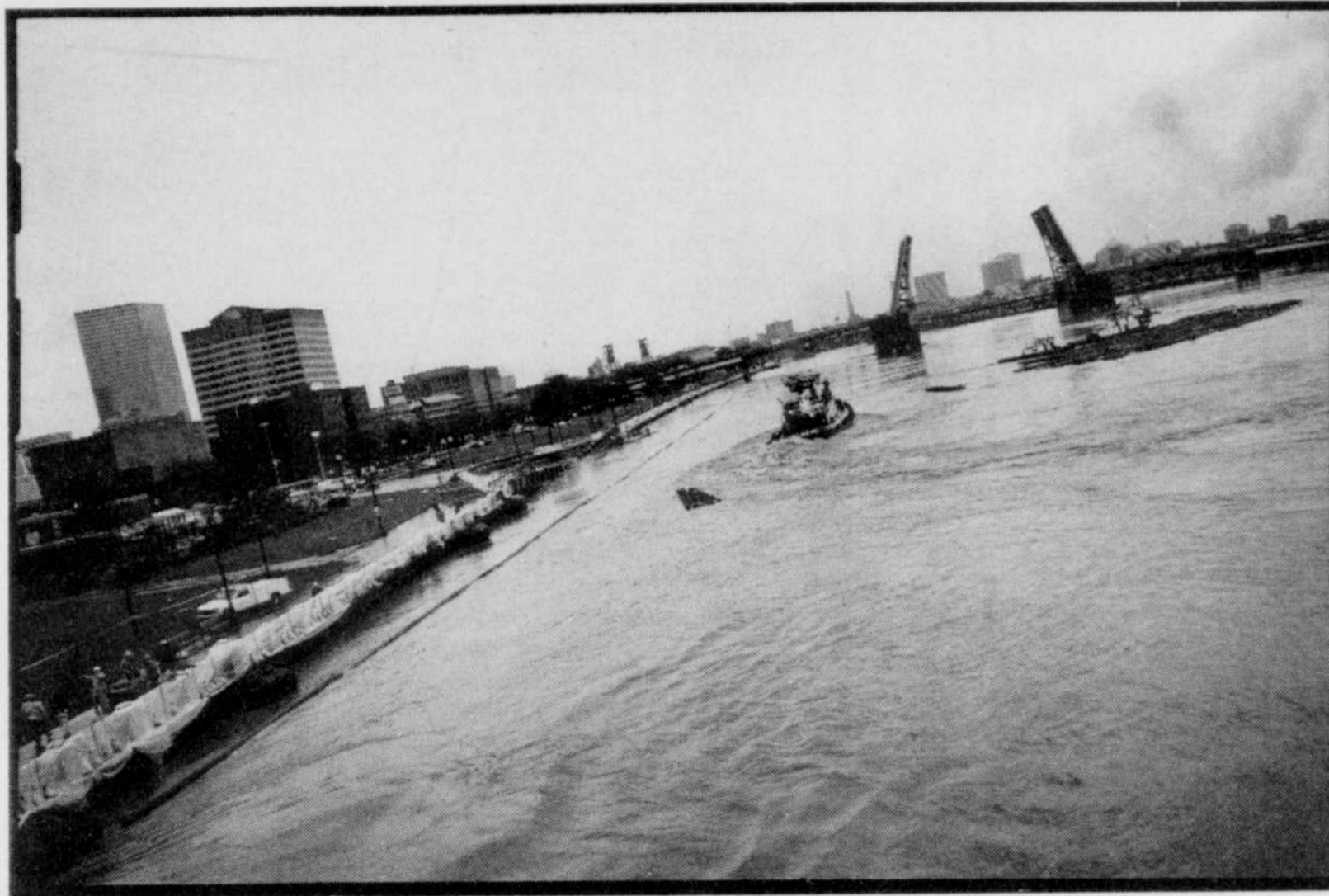
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Waterfront Park in Portland with the Willamette River filled to the brink.

PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

guest editorial

Family matters

For lesbians and gay men, family has become the frontier issue in our struggle for freedom, justice and respect

by John D'Emilio

What is a family? According to opinion polls, a majority of people in the United States understand family as a group of people who love one another and take care of each other in good times and bad.

What is a family? In the hands of the radical Christian right, it has become a symbol and a weapon. A symbol of an imagined past when everything was just fine. A weapon that divides people into categories of good or bad, moral or immoral, productive citizen or irresponsible parasite. The allegedly "pro-family" rhetoric of the radical right is deeply homophobic and antifeminist, and exploits historically powerful racist stereotypes.

What is a family? For lesbians and gay men, family has become the frontier issue in our struggle for freedom, justice and respect. Everywhere we look, family issues are surfacing—in the courts, in state legislatures, in workplaces, in the schools, in communities of faith, in the activities of our community centers and other organizations. Sometimes in picking up a copy of a gay and lesbian newspaper, nothing but family issues of one sort or another seem to fill its pages.

It wasn't always so. When I was first coming out in the late '60s, as a college student influenced by the hippie counterculture and the first wave of radical feminist theory, "family" was something I could do without. It seemed that my only choices were to have a family, which meant my family of origin, or to be gay, which meant exile and escape from the constrictions of a heterosexist institution.

So why does family seem so important to us in the 1990s? Is the concern for family simply a defensive, reactive move on our part, a knee-jerk response to the "traditional family values" rhetoric of the radical Christian right? Or does the rise of family issues tell us something about how we have changed and what we want?

I think it's the latter. There are good reasons growing out of the history of our movement and communities that have pushed

family issues to the front burner.

One has to do with the growing diversity of the public face of our movement and our community organizations. Lesbians, for instance, have often taken the lead in campaigns involving custody, adoption and our right to be parents. Lesbians and gay men of color have spoken and written passionately of the importance of strong, extended family ties for the survival of their home communities in the face of racism, and of their unwillingness to have to choose between family ties or their sexual identity. As gay men and lesbians in smaller communities come out of the closet and organize for change, family is something just around the corner, not something to escape from.

Family issues challenge homophobia in new and important ways. One of the most destructive and persistent stereotypes used to perpetuate hatred against us and keep us isolated and separate is the claim that we are a danger to children. The gay man who molests children, or the lesbian teacher who corrupts her students, have been common cultural myths. As more and more parents come out of the closet and assert their right to keep their children, as more and more of us choose to have children even after coming out, we force the issue of queers and children in proactive ways.

Family issues matter. Whether it be the public rituals we create to celebrate our committed relationships or our decisions to have children in our lives, the articulation of a lesbian and gay "family politics" has the power to move our freedom struggle forward.

John D'Emilio, Ph.D., is the director of the Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. D'Emilio is a leading historian on sexuality and the gay and lesbian movement in the United States. He is the author of Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities (1983); Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America (1988), and Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University (1992).

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