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local news

Getting in sync

Groups meet to develop a disaster-preparedness plan for Oregon's sexual minority communities

by Inga Sorensen

When the floods came, the emergency response teams kicked into high gear, giving Pacific Northwest residents critical information, as well as food, shelter and financial assistance. It is a model employed following nearly every natural disaster, from tornadoes to hurricanes to earthquakes.

Now several sexual minority organizations in the Portland area are constructing their own crisis response framework, not to be used after a flood, mind you, but during the immediate aftermath of an occurrence, such as an anti-gay hate crime or a major court ruling, that has a dramatic impact on the sexual minority community.

"We are trying to put a network in place where, let's say within the first 48 hours of such an event, we can say, 'Here's where the community will meet,' 'Here are the designated spokespeople,' 'Here are the counselors to help people if need be,'" explains the Rev. Roy Cole, pastor of the Portland Metropolitan Community Church, a religious establishment in Northeast Portland that serves sexual minorities.

Cole is also the co-spokesperson for a newly formed coalition of queer-friendly organizations that came together following the murders of Roxanne Ellis and Michelle Abdill, a long-time lesbian couple who lived in Medford. Cole says the working name of the group is the Coalition for Community Communication, and its mission, in part, is to "respond to media news or events that strongly impact the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and transsexual community [by providing] an immediate forum for discussion, education, emotional support and action...."

Upon the discovery of Abdill's and Ellis' slain bodies in early December, gay and lesbian organizations in the Portland metropolitan area received anguished calls from community members, as well as a persistent wave of media inquiries.

By many indications, the killings prompted a sense of crisis in the gay and lesbian community—especially early on, when a suspect had yet to be apprehended and a motive for the killings remained unclear.

"The deaths of Roxanne and Michelle really got many of us within the sexual minorities community thinking about the importance of creating a structure that is loose enough for each [participating] group to feel comfortable, but also structured enough so the community can move through a difficult time together," says Cole.

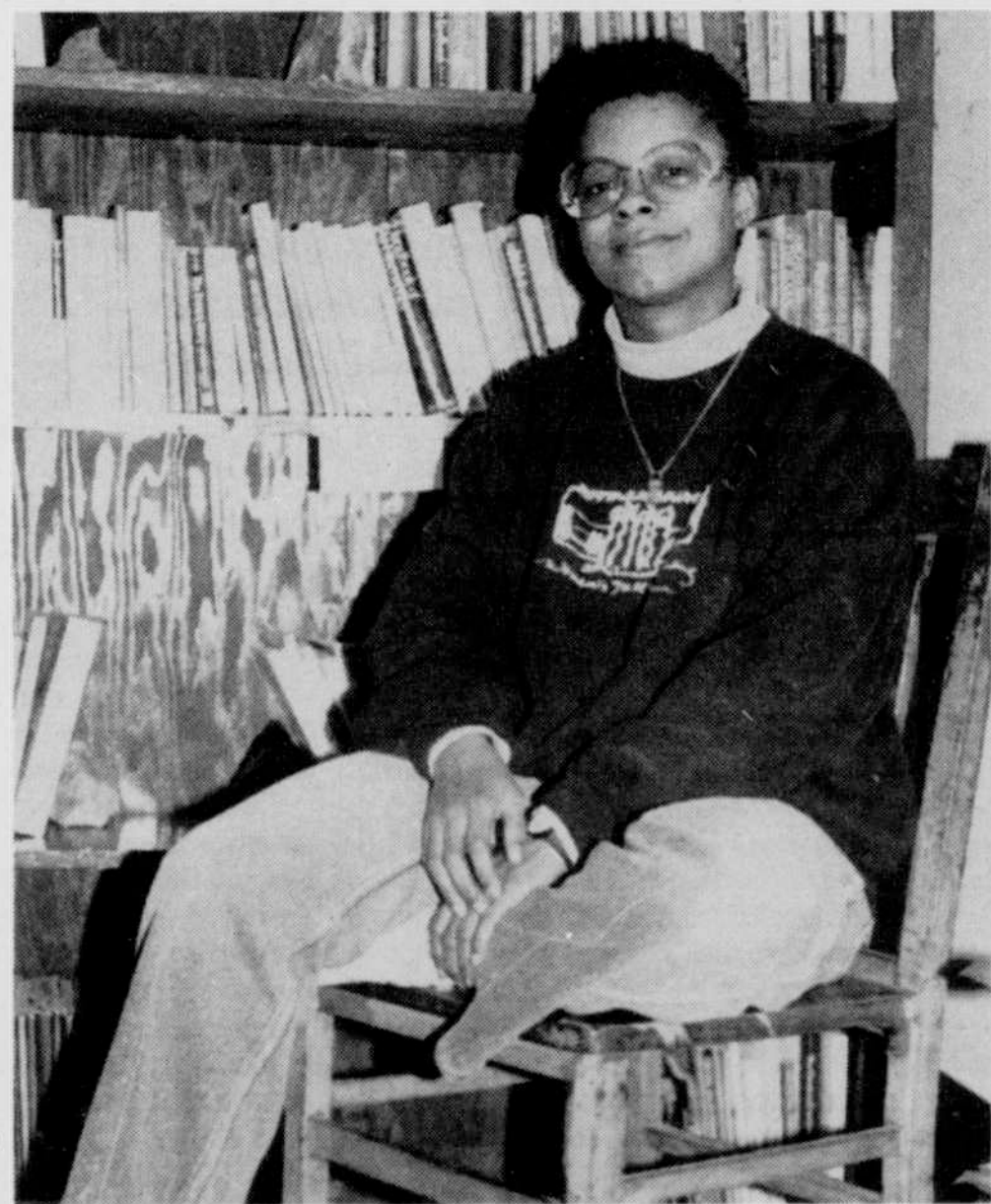
Following the Medford murders, a service at Portland's First Congregational Church was held. Abdill and Ellis were very active in their local Methodist church; the Portland service was organized by members of the mainstream religious establishment. Afterward, a candlelight vigil orga-

nized by the queer community was held. It featured speakers from a wide range of community organizations, including MCC Portland.

"When I was speaking [at the vigil], I felt my words were out of sync with the way people were feeling—that rawness," says Cole. "It just felt so inadequate. It seemed to me like we could have done better."

Soon after the vigil, representatives from Love Makes a Family Inc.; People of Faith Against Bigotry; the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation; Rural Organizing Project; Portland Mayor Vera Katz's office; Basic Rights Oregon; MCC; *Just Out*; the Northwest Gender Alliance; and Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays began meeting regularly to discuss ways the community could effectively respond to highly charged situations.

Hence the creation of the Coalition for Community Communication.



LaVerne Lewis

"It's been a very organic process," says Cole. LaVerne Lewis, executive director of the Portland-based Lesbian Community Project and co-spokesperson for the coalition, says, "We need a secure place where we can get together among ourselves to grieve, to talk, to be with one another. We need to know how to handle the media when they call. Hopefully this group can help with all of that."

Cole adds, "I would like to say that there won't be any more hate crimes, or any more tragedies, but that's not realistic. And we have to remember that we have another OCA campaign coming up. Hopefully, this will help us prepare for what may happen down the road."

Cole says those interested in becoming involved in the Coalition for Community Communication should call MCC at 281-8868 or LCP at 223-0071.