

## PROFILE

## Queer networkers

*"Database Divas" come to the aid of Northwest nonprofits*

by Inga Sorensen

Three years ago all of the national gay and lesbian organizations were paper factories. They may have put together a report that would get plunked down on a shelf. Someone would call and request a copy of it, and maybe the report would be packed up and sent out several weeks later. It was a cumbersome and ineffective way to do things, but that has changed dramatically," says Karen Wickre, co-founder of the San Francisco-based Digital Queers, a national nonprofit organization of queer computer technology specialists whose goal is to assist gay and lesbian organizations with their high technology needs.

In fact, several gay-and-lesbian-rights groups can thank Digital Queers for giving them the tools—everything from tangibles like computer hardware and software to sound programming advice—to run more efficiently.

Since many queer organizations, particularly nonprofits, are working with limited resources and staff, every minute and dollar saved, says Wickre, is considered a blessing.

"Those same reports that would have been sitting on that shelf only to be mailed out weeks later, can in many instances now be downloaded with a

became the second city in the region to hold regular DQNW meetings and activities.

"It is apparent that there is a strong interest here in the Northwest for Digital Queers," says DQNW co-founder and chair John McMullen. "With companies such as Intel, Datadesk, Now Software, Hewlett-Packard and US West Communications, it only makes sense that DQNW would actively involve itself with the Oregon community."

"We've got about 35 members in the Portland area right now," says Canby resident Scott Jensen, who is organizing DQ-Portland.

Of those members, he says, about 60 percent are men. Wickre says that matches the breakdown nationally, too.

"I think this chapter will have two major functions," says the 32-year-old Jensen. "It will act as a social group and a charitable organization."

He adds, "Our primary goal, though, is to assist gay and lesbian organizations in any way we can, perhaps by helping them assess their [computer] needs or obtain hardware and software, or getting them on-line."

"I'm happy that a chapter is getting up and running in Portland," says Wickre. "We advise fledgling [DQ chapters] not to overdo it at first.



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snap of a finger. It saves the organization time and money, and the person [who requested the report] gets it fast," she says.

Since its founding in 1992, Digital Queers has provided pro bono consulting advice and computer hardware/software to such organizations as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force; Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays; the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association; and Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund.

For example, Wickre says her group raised \$100,000 for a new Macintosh system for NGLTF, and donated an additional \$300,000 in "high-end consulting" and other services to the group. DQ also helped Lambda obtain and maintain its Windows network.

"Many of our members have not traditionally been political activists, though many have been checkbook activists," says Wickre. "This is their way of doing something more than simply writing a check. This gives them a chance to offer their expertise to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community. That's why Digital Queers was created."

Given the prevalence of high technology operations—and some would say queer people—throughout the Pacific Northwest, it's no surprise that a Digital Queers regional chapter would eventually emerge. In fact, a little more than a year ago, Digital Queers Northwest began holding monthly meetings in Seattle.

To date, DQNW has committed \$2,000 in computer hardware/software, training and services to beneficiaries in the Northwest, including the Seattle-based Gay City Health Project, Sunshine Thrift Shops and Northwest Gay Officers Action League.

While it has gained great momentum in Washington, DQNW also serves Oregon, Idaho, Alaska and British Columbia. A few weeks ago Portland

They should pick a project that falls within our guidelines—that is, that it be a queer organization—and then maybe do an assessment of that group's needs, or perhaps raise a few dollars for software. Don't start with a million different projects."

Jensen says one of DQ-Portland's first projects may be to assist Bend-based Beyond the Closet, which works to create queer visibility in central and rural Oregon, with its computer needs.

"Beyond the Closet does great work, and I know that they're trying to do outreach to [rural sexual minority youth]," he says. "If we can make their organizing efforts that much easier, that would be great."

He adds: "There are so many things we could do. At the very least, we can act as a troubleshooter for organizations who may have questions. They can just pick up the phone and say, 'This is our problem. What can we do about this?' That's not unusual, because, let's face it, computers can be intimidating to a lot of people, as can the Internet."

And what would any queer group be without its T-shirt slogans?

"It's true—we have T-shirts that say things like 'Click and Drag Queen,' and 'Database Diva,'" laughs Jensen, who hopes DQ-Portland members will proudly wear those shirts this June for the chapter's first Portland Lesbian and Gay Pride celebration.

"We hope to have a booth," he says. "We want people to know we're here."

*For more information about Digital Queers Northwest, contact the group via e-mail at [dqnw@eor.com](mailto:dqnw@eor.com), or by phone at (206) 720-1190. To contact DQ-Portland, call Scott Jensen at (503) 263-0994. DQ-Portland annual memberships are \$35 for individuals, \$20 for students.*



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