

local news

Safety report

The Crisis Response Team is officially unveiled; sexual orientation-based hate crimes in Portland decreased in 1995

by Inga Sorensen

Fifteen years ago, on the eve of his 30th birthday, William Warren was beaten to a pulp. As "four or five guys in their late teens" tried to crack his head open on the sidewalk curb, his partner lay several feet away curled in the fetal position, playing possum.

"We were coming home from a meeting. It was about 10:30 or 11 pm," explains Warren, who was then living in Dorchester, Mass. "These guys began taunting us, saying things like 'Hey faggot.' I still remember the sound of the first swish of the baseball bat."

This was even too much for Warren, who as a youngster growing up in the South Bronx witnessed his share of fistfights in the street.

"Sometimes drunk guys would get into fights, but these people who were pounding on us were trying to *kill us*, simply for being who we were," he says.

The couple survived the beating, and Warren believes it may likely be because he fought so hard "to try and get free to protect" his partner, who "was totally nonviolent—he wouldn't even hurt a housefly."

After limping home, battered and shocked, they dialed 911.

Warren says two police officers responded, came to the hospital with the couple, and instructed medical personnel to keep the pair together. "They knew we were a couple and in their own way they were respecting that," he recalls. "They stayed with us until we were treated, and then they took us home."

Warren continues to experience a complex array of emotions stemming from that violent encounter. No longer can he witness even a staged beating without wincing or feeling nauseated. At the same time, he remembers with great warmth the care provided by the police officers, who handled the situation with sensitivity.

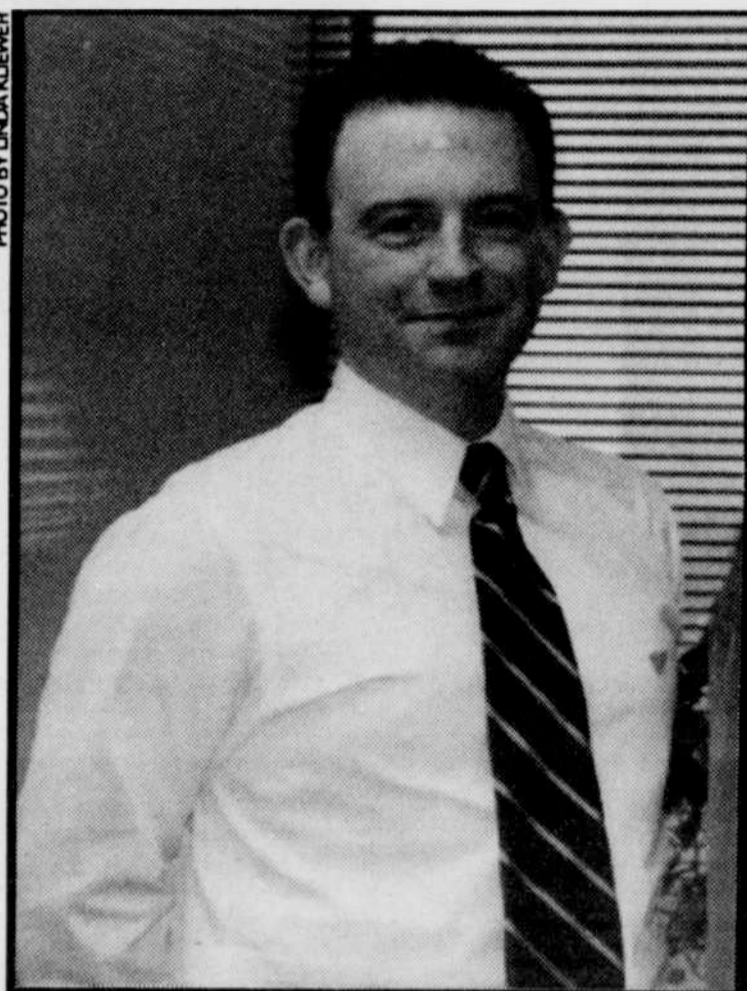
And somehow it is not surprising that Warren is now a crime prevention specialist and an active member of the Sexual Minorities Roundtable, a regular gathering of members of the sexual minorities community and Portland police officials.

"No one should have to experience what I experienced that day," Warren said during a recent press conference at Portland police headquarters in downtown Portland.

The briefing was designed in part to unveil the

Crisis Response Team, the latest cooperative effort between law enforcement and the sexual minorities community.

"I believe that this is the first crisis response team specifically serving a sexual minority community anywhere," says LaVerne Lewis, executive director of the Portland-based Lesbian Community Project/Anti-Violence Project, which runs



a hate crime/anti-violence reporting hot line geared toward Oregon's sexual minorities community.

According to Lewis, CRT will consist of a group of screened and trained volunteers from the queer community who will provide emotional and practical support to sexual minority victims of crimes or traumatic incidents.

Volunteers will be called to a crisis scene or hospital by authorized police officers and assist victims and their families in the first few hours following a tragedy. CRT volunteers may provide emotional support; make necessary phone calls; make referrals to appropriate agencies; and notify family, friends and clergy.

"This is very exciting, and I hope the commu-

nity can feel more empowered knowing that someone who understands will be at their side, hopefully lessening the fear," says Warren. "When you fear, right then and there you become a victim."

According to Portland police, reported hate crimes against sexual minorities in the city plummeted in 1995. Hate crimes are those crimes committed against a person for a number of reasons, including her or his sexual orientation.

Of the 184 incidents last year classified as hate crimes, 47 involved sexual orientation. One hundred and eighty hate crimes were reported in Portland in 1994, but according to AVP statistics, 106 of those involved sexual orientation—a 56 percent decline.

James Bellah, a Portland detective assigned to the bureau's bias crimes unit, says 1995 marked the first time that the AVP and Portland police

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recorded the same number of hate/bias reports.

"To me that's the big story," says Bellah. "Typically [AVP] receives many more calls than us because people in the sexual minorities community are often more inclined to trust [the AVP] instead of the police. The fact that our numbers were virtually the same this time hopefully shows that people in the gay and lesbian community are beginning to really trust us. That makes me feel proud."

But activists and law enforcement say even though there has been a dramatic decline in reported anti-gay and -lesbian violence, the rate could shoot back up as we approach the November election. The Oregon Citizens Alliance is

pushing another anti-gay-rights initiative, which some fear could lead to an escalation in anti-queer violence.

"It's hard to predict. We saw a jump in incidents in February and at first I didn't know why, but then I remembered all the coverage the gay students were getting. Maybe that had something to do with it. It doesn't have to take a ballot measure," says Bellah. "All it takes is some media coverage."

During 1995, 2,212 anti-lesbian and -gay incidents were documented by 11 national tracking programs monitored by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs. That number marks an 8 percent decrease from the 2,401 incidents documented by those programs in 1994.

Some of the national tracking programs saw large increases in reports—El Paso experienced a 42 percent increase—while Portland saw the most dramatic decrease—down 56 percent from 1994.

The NCAVP believes that violence will surge in 1996, due to the divisive national election "and because of more than a dozen statewide campaigns to block recognition of same-sex marriages."

According to NCAVP, "contrary to a frequently repeated myth concerning anti-lesbian and -gay violence, only a small proportion of the total incidents (15 percent) involved only harassment, [which is a] noncriminal behavior in most states. On the other hand, 85 percent of the incidents involved acts which would constitute criminal behavior in most states."

Bellah says in Portland most of the anti-lesbian and -gay incidents involve vandalism.

"It's been a while since we've seen a violent assault. We see that more in the race category, where lots of assaults occur. But in terms of the sexual minority community, the vast majority of reports involve vandalism."

NCAVP documented 29 gay- and lesbian-related murders in 1995, down from 38 the previous year. Ninety percent of the known offenders for all the documented incidents were male, compared with 92 percent in 1994. Two-thirds of the victims were men, and most of the offenders were younger than 30.

"I was lucky to live to tell my tale," says Warren. "I want to see that others have that same luxury."

Anyone who thinks she or he has been the victim of a hate crime is encouraged to call the Anti-Violence Project at 796-1703 in Portland or 1-800-796-1703 outside the city, or call the Portland Police Bureau at 823-0434. For information about volunteering for the Crisis Response Team, call LCP at 223-0071.

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