

PROFILE

Out from isolation

Coos County's GALON is bringing communities together in Southern Oregon

by Inga Sorensen

Larry Garcia was "looking for a place to heal."

"I had worked as a nurse in the HIV field in San Francisco for nine years. I had seen so many people die of AIDS that it was really beginning to take an emotional and physical toll on me," says Garcia, who last September left his nursing job, packed his bags, and headed north to Oregon.

"I really needed a rural experience," says the openly gay Garcia, who settled on the southern coast in Coos County. "I knew that being surrounded by trees and open spaces, as well as the ocean, would be the best thing that I could do for myself."

Jane Iwahashi, who grew up in the Bay Area, was also yearning for a small-town existence.

Like Garcia, Iwahashi, who identifies as bisexual, landed in Coos County, really for no particular reason except for the fact that it was a more rural environment.

Neither knew much about the area, they just hungered for a peace and quiet not often afforded to urban dwellers.

"But no matter how much a person may like the open spaces," says Garcia, "no one wants to feel isolated."

In an effort to savor his new country lifestyle, Garcia enthusiastically attended the Coos County fair, which was held in Coos Bay about two weeks after his arrival in Oregon.

"I'm used to that urban experience where when you're trying to meet other gay people, you're looking for cropped hair," he laughs. "Well, let me tell you that that's not the way gay people look in rural Oregon."

Garcia stopped at a booth that featured the local human rights coalition and a group known as GALON, Coos County's Gay and Lesbian Outreach Network, which was founded a little more than eight years ago to foster a sense of queer community and stimulate HIV-prevention efforts. From that stop-off, Garcia learned about an upcoming autumn equinox picnic for the gay and lesbian community.

"I went to it and was absolutely astounded that about 85 people showed up. That was a lot of people," he says. "Needless to say, I was delighted. And now that I knew there were a lot of gay and lesbian people around, I thought it would be good to get more involved in the community."

Iwahashi, meanwhile, learned about GALON—and the existence of a queer network, albeit a sometimes tenuous one—while working at a local natural food store.

"I picked up a GALON newsletter and from that went to a potluck," says Iwahashi, who lives with her partner of two years, Deb Babb. "I then went to a Fourth of July picnic, which I thought went really well. Lots of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people showed up for it, as did some straight allies. It was a lot of fun."



GALON members hike monthly: In February they took in the beauty of Coos County's Golden Falls

The July picnic did, however, cause a little stir. Some signs with anti-gay sayings were apparently posted around the site, but were quickly removed by law enforcement officials who patrolled the area. Aside from the signs, the event went off without a hitch.

"I think it was a real positive thing for everyone," says Linda Manous, a registered nurse with the Coos County Department of Public Health.

Manous, who is heterosexual, is very supportive of the sexual minorities community and frequently

writes about HIV prevention for the "GALONNews," GALON's regular newsletter that reaches an estimated (mostly queer) 175 residents throughout Coos County.

"My husband, who could be defined as a redneck, came with me to the picnic. Picture this: There's my husband talking with a transgendered person who showed up in a delightful little sun dress, red fingernail polish—and a beard," she laughs. "Both my son and my husband had a ball."

According to a recent "GALONNews," Coos

County is home to nearly "1,500 out of the closet" lesbian, bisexual, transgender, cross-dressing and gay people."

"Once known as a gay-bashing, redneck and bigoted place on the Southern Oregon coast, where the idea of any gay person coming out was unthinkable, Coos County is now seeing remarkable change," says the newsletter. "How did this come about? The answer is simple and is representative of what is going on across our nation today: Gay and lesbian people are simply saying, 'Enough is enough.' And that was the start of GALON..."

Since its founding nearly a decade ago, GALON has published a monthly newspaper—later traded in for the newsletter format—and sponsored an HIV-support group, speakers' bureau, reference library, referral service and a hot line.

Over the years GALON members have assisted in HIV/AIDS prevention by distributing free condoms throughout Coos County, and they continue to work closely with local law enforcement agencies to reduce hate and bias crimes in the area.

Like many queer groups, particularly in rural areas, GALON has experienced ebbs and flows in participant involvement. But Garcia and Iwahashi—the group's newly elected co-chairs—are doing what they can to increase that flow.

Iwahashi organized a February hike to Golden and Silver Falls, squeezing six people and a dog into a station wagon, and picking up historical tidbits along the way from more informed hikers: "Did you know that the first logging truck driver was a woman?"

"I know Jane has talked about us doing a fundraiser for the local women's shelter and building even stronger relationships with the various agencies in town. She's talked about GALON becoming a part of the 'Adopt a Highway' program so we are more visible. When the weather gets better we can go camping or white-water rafting. The possibilities are endless," says Garcia, adding that he enjoys the fact that both men and women are active in GALON.

"The bylaws specifically say that the leadership must include one woman and one man, which I think is great," says Garcia. "When I was living in San Francisco, I was seeing an increase in separatism between men and women. It's not like that here. There's a real desire to do things together. We enjoy our time with one another."

Garcia says his experience with the general community has also been extremely positive, despite recent reports of bias-related incidents in Southern Oregon.

"I find the climate in Oregon to be very accepting," he says. "I was a bit surprised to find that people seemed to care less whether or not I was gay. People are basically respectful.... This was a good choice for me."

For more information about the group, write to GALON, PO Box 1324, Coos Bay, OR 97420.

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