

# local news

A few years back, Kathleen Saadat found herself perched on a rock—at 10,000 feet—in Leadville, Colo. It was a remarkable circumstance given her fear of heights.

"For the first half-hour I just sat there and cried, I was so scared," says Saadat, co-chair of Portland's Rainbow Coalition and a National Gay and Lesbian Task Force board member.

The longtime human rights activist and former state director of affirmative action was there as part of a Pacific Crest Outward Bound excursion, which utilized the outdoors to challenge and develop the leadership and group skills of participants.

"I was there to climb that rock, and that's what I did—even through my tears," reflects Saadat. "I embraced that challenge.... I grew from that experience. It *changed* me."

Personal change, says Saadat, is also a critical component in the struggle against society's prevailing "isms"—racism, sexism, classism, to name a few.

One may think racism and homophobia are terrible, but it's a whole different thing to step out of the cerebral into the active to begin to do something about it.

She says: "During measures 9 and 13, gays and lesbians said 'Help us, Help us.' But it's one thing for us to say: 'You are me.' Now we have to say, 'I am you.'"

That sentiment is echoed by many, particularly in light of last month's cross burning at the home of Gresham resident Billy Ballard, and the arson at Immanuel Christian Fellowship, a predominantly black church nestled in North Portland.

Over the past several months, dozens of churches—primarily those attended by African Americans—have been set ablaze. Until recently, most of those fires have occurred in the South. Last month, however, two African American-oriented establishments in the Pacific Northwest fell victim to suspected arson.

In Seattle, federal and local officials are investigating a fire that caused an estimated \$20,000 in damage to the Eritrean Community Center, a part of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, which serves Seattle's black community. Arson is suspected, but center spokespeople reportedly say they are unsure the June 16 fire was racially motivated.

Four days later in Portland, an arsonist struck Immanuel Christian Fellowship. At press time, authorities had not charged anyone in that arson, and thus far federal authorities say they have found no national conspiracy in the rash of church burnings.

The Rev. Mark Strong of Immanuel Christian Fellowship has warned against assuming race was the motive for the arson. Nonetheless, he and others say the wave of church fires underscores a continuing racial divide that needs to be addressed openly and honestly.

"Cross burnings and church fires are nothing new," says state Rep. Avel Gordly, a Democrat who represents Northeast Portland. "We've seen this over the generations, not just in the South, but here in Oregon as well. This state has its own history of intolerance and racism. Exclusion laws are just one example."

Steve Gardner is the research director for the Coalition for Human Dignity, which tracks white supremacist and neo-Nazi activities nationwide. "We have no idea who may have set the church fire. There is no strong Klan presence, relatively speaking, in the Pacific Northwest, but it is a region inhabited by organized neo-Nazis and white supremacists," he says.

"You never want to predict that this is going to happen, but in recent years there have been cross burnings, as well as the [1988 beating death by Skinheads] of Mulugeta Seraw, an Ethiopian man, and the Lloyd Center beatings," says Gardner.

Marcy Westerling of the Rural Organizing

## Undaunted

*The work goes on as communities rally together to stand against violence and hate*

by Inga Sorensen

Project, which has helped launch 60 local human dignity groups statewide, says: "Church burnings have historically been geographically specific to the South, so it was a little surprising when it happened here. But let's face it, Portland is one of the whitest cities in America, and some people actually come here so they can be 'minimally burdened' by people of color."

Human rights activist and author Suzanne Pharr, who hails from the South but currently

lives in Portland, adds: "The Christian Coalition is saying this is an attack on Christianity. But this is about racial hatred. The church is the heart of the black community, and it is being attacked."

"Why?" she continues. "Certainly it has to do with the inflamed and heightened rhetoric we are hearing nationally. Every social problem is being blamed on people of color: affirmative action, immigration, crime, welfare, public services. You just name an issue, and it's been linked to race."

Michael Pullen, marketing director for the Urban League of Portland, expresses a similar thought.

"National politics have gotten so draconian—the demonization of welfare recipients, the cuts in funding to urban areas—it certainly has to be the factor," he says.

Gordly, a self-described optimist, says she has chosen to view the recent cross burning and church arson in a positive light.

"Of course it's a terrible thing, but I see lots of constructive opportunities. Maybe it will help us begin to talk to one another about race on a one-on-one basis," she says. "People need to share their stories. There are people who work side by side every day and talk about everything *but* race. Even with O.J. and all of that, they just couldn't do it. If we can finally take that step and begin sharing our experiences, it can make a difference."

"A letter of support to the pastor makes a difference. Attendance at a religious gathering makes a difference. Help rebuild the church," says Pullen. "Standing in that burned out church will resonate with me for a long, long, long time."

In response to the church arson, Portland Mayor Vera Katz issued a letter to the leaders of more than 700 local houses of worship urging them to increase security measures at their respective facilities.

"Concerned citizens and church parishioners should contact their house of worship and volunteer as block watchers to prevent a reoccurrence of this type of incident," wrote Katz.

In her letter, the mayor also indicated that

Portland Crime Stoppers, in cooperation with the Oregon Council Against Arson, was offering a combined reward of up to \$2,000 for information leading to the arrest of the suspect(s) involved.

Bill Wassmuth is executive director of the Seattle-based Northwest Coalition Against Malignant Harassment, a coalition that addresses the problems of discrimination and harassment throughout several western states.

"I think most residents in the region have pretty positive experiences living here. But day-to-day racism exists everywhere, and we have to stand together to fight it," he says, adding that religious and civic leaders in Seattle organized a vigil in the wake of the arsons.

"Members of different houses of worship went to each other's house of worship to show solidarity," he says. The Seattle vigil was organized by the Washington Association of Churches.

"I've heard that I am on Sunday is the most segregated time of the week. Why does it have to be that way?" says Gordly. "We should go to other houses of worship. It's an enormous opportunity."

The Sunday following the Immanuel church fire, a special service was held at Jefferson High School's football field. A multiracial, multireligious, diverse crowd of hundreds turned out for the event, which has repeatedly been described as empowering and joyous.

"The rainbow of faces—and the jubilant smiles—showed just how powerful that coming together is," says Gordly. "It's the same thing with Lesbian and Gay Pride. I marched in the parade and it is such a moving experience because of the great diversity and the happiness around that collective experience."

The Rev. Roy Cole is pastor of Portland's Metropolitan Community Church, which serves members of the sexual minorities faith community. Cole says he contacted Strong's wife following the fire.

"I offered her any help that we could give. I said if they needed a space they could certainly use ours," he says.

Cole says he empathizes with Immanuel congregants and has often viewed MCC as a possible target of violence. "Being a predominantly gay establishment you have to think about it," says Cole, adding that he has taken some precautionary steps to secure MCC, though he did not want those steps made public.

Cole further says a 50-voice choir from the First Baptist Church of Seattle recently performed at MCC. "They actually called us," he says. "At first I thought maybe they got the wrong church."

I told them that we were geared toward [sexual minorities], but it wasn't an issue at all. They came down and we had a wonderful time."

Following the cross burning in Gresham, the East Metro Human Rights Coalition and the Metropolitan Human Rights Commission of Portland/Multnomah County hosted a communitywide interdenominational service called a "Time for Prayer and Peace." An estimated 200 people attended the service.

"Prejudice is prejudice is prejudice," says the Rev. Ann Duffy, the openly lesbian pastor of the Zion United Church of Christ in Gresham.

"You can't talk about racism without talking about homophobia or sexism or classism," says Duffy, who also serves on the steering committee of the East Metro Human Rights Coalition, one of first local human dignity groups established in the face of the anti-gay Ballot Measure 9.

She says, "We are talking about an underlying hatred or fear of someone who is viewed as different."

Duffy says during the past few years the coalition has brought the Anne Frank Exhibit to local high schools, sponsored a showing of *Not in My Town* last fall that drew 125 people, presented a photo exhibit featuring sexual minorities, and most recently, organized the interfaith service.

In the upcoming months, Duffy says the group will have a booth at a citywide fair; sponsor a showing of *The Color of Fear*, which focuses on racial matters; and be involved with *The Wheel*, a drama production put on by local students which explores the discriminatory experiences faced by youth. Duffy is also working to bring to Gresham a compelling exhibit highlighting the problem of domestic violence.

The Metropolitan Human Rights Commission, meanwhile, is sponsoring anti-racism workshops that are open to the public.

"Racism is sometimes hard to counteract because it can be more subtle," says MHRC's Helen Cheek. "The anti-gay and lesbian initiatives were so blatantly homophobic, which perhaps made it easier to rally against them. But just because we may not see overt racist actions on a regular basis doesn't mean racism isn't a huge problem.... Our workshops hopefully can get some dialogue going."

Gordly adds, "We can also support groups that have been doing tremendous work over the years, including the NAACP and the Urban League. We have the power.... If you don't believe you can't achieve."

People in the sexual minorities community should know firsthand the importance of one-on-one conversation and collective response.

"We would not have defeated measures 9 or 13 without people outside the gay and lesbian community getting involved," says Pharr. "Now we have to stand with the poor, women, and minorities *because they are us.*"

"I don't think it's a far stretch to realize that the same person who may burn a cross on someone's yard is the same person who would walk over to Stark Street and bash a gay person," says Julie Davis of Basic Rights Oregon, the successor group to the No on 13 campaign.

"At the same time, people in the lesbian and gay community can get stuck in stereotypes as much as anyone else. We have to work past that fear," she says.

The Rev. Cecil Prescod, pastor of Highland United Church of Christ, says, "I don't want to sound like a Red Cross commercial, but this really is about talking neighbor to neighbor."

Prescod, an MHRC member, has been involved in many community groups, including People of Faith Against Bigotry, Coalition of Black Men and Brother to Brother.

"The [sexual minorities] community always talks about the importance of coalition-building and standing together," he says. "Well, this is an opportunity for us to walk the talk."



GRAPHIC DESIGN BY JANE BIEHL AND MARY WALLACE