

GETTING TOGETHER

A NEW ATTITUDE

A Men & Masculinity Conference to be held in Portland highlights breaking free of cultural barriers

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by Inga Sorensen

Oregon state Rep. George Eighmey, the teddy-bearish gay legislator from Southeast Portland, vowed never to pretend again.

"I had spent the first 40 years of my life fighting my sexuality—fighting being who I really am," explains Eighmey, who is now in his mid-50s.

During those four decades Eighmey followed through with the cultural expectations which required that he act straight, marry someone of the opposite sex and procreate.

"I was living a facade. My own internalized homophobia stopped me from being true to myself and others. I robbed my then-wife and children of a complete person. I denied her the opportunity to be with a male companion who was 100 percent, even 90 percent, committed to her, because—while my life is richer because of our friendship—I couldn't love her fully," says Eighmey, adding that at one particular juncture he was the "chair or vice-chair of 17 different boards just so [he] didn't have to be intimate with [his] wife."

Undoubtedly, cultural expectations have forced not just Eighmey but many people—men and women, sexual minorities, people of color—into excruciatingly tight little boxes that at best restrict honest self-expression and at worst literally destroy lives.

Eighmey is one example of a person who managed to tear through "the expected," but it was a long time in coming. Nevertheless Eighmey prevailed, and he has pledged to extinguish homophobia whenever he sees it.

"There was a lawmaker with a desk near mine. He was a good Democrat," says Eighmey, also a Democrat. "At first it was very apparent that he was fearful of being friendly with me because people might wonder about his sexual orientation. I felt I could have a good working relationship with him except that his *thing* kept getting in the way, so I asked him to dinner.

"He agreed, and we went to this public place for dinner. The first thing I said was, 'Listen, you're not my type. I'm not after your body. You're straight and I'm only attracted to gay men, and one man in particular,'" continues Eighmey, referring to his partner of 15 years. "Then I asked him if he was comfortable with his sexuality, and he said yes. I said, 'Good, so am I.' Doing that enabled us to get past the tension and all that macho baloney. We were able to look at each other as human beings. We talked on a human level."

The story doesn't end there. Eighmey, in his ever-bubbly manner, stretched the boundaries a smidgen farther.

"We got up to leave and I said, 'I want to give you a hug.' He kind of took a breath and said OK, and I gave him this big hug and then asked, 'Was that so bad?' Now we joke and have a really genuine relationship. Now he even throws me kisses from across the room. That happened because we crashed a barrier."

Crashing barriers, challenging the harmful rules of masculinity, and sharing visions of a just society are among the goals of "Women & Men: Visions of Justice," the 21st National Men & Masculinity Conference set for July 25-28 at Lewis & Clark College in Southwest Portland.

The National Organization for Men Against Sexism, an activist organization supporting positive changes for men (and society) is the parent organization of the conference.

NOMAS claims to advocate a perspective that is pro-feminist, gay-affirmative, anti-racist and committed to justice on a broad range of social issues including age, religion and physical ability.

NOMAS materials state, in part: "We are deeply supportive of men who are struggling with the issues of traditional masculinity.... As an organization for changing men, we strongly support the continuing struggle for women for full

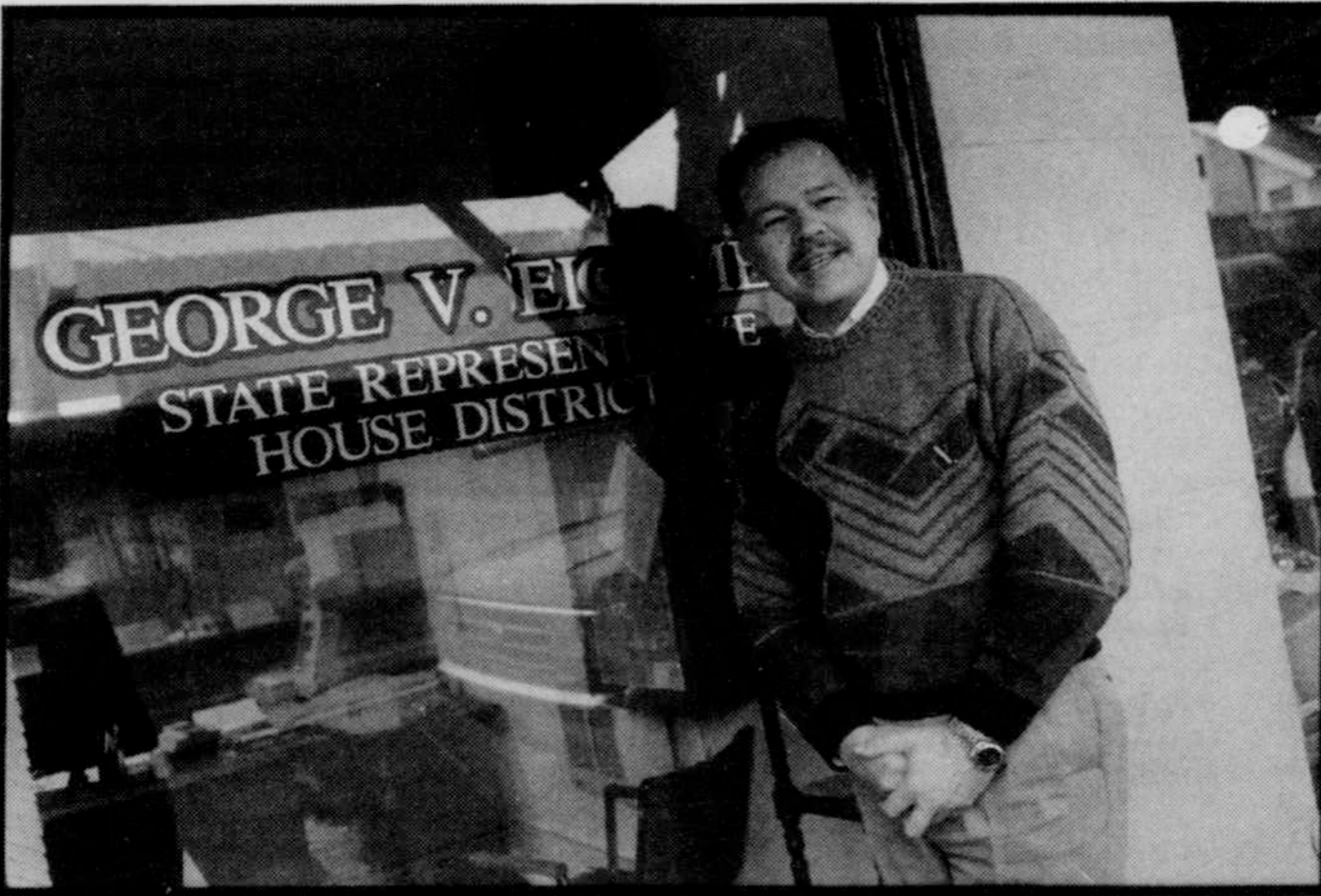
equality. We applaud and support the insights and positive social changes that feminism has stimulated for both women and men. We oppose such injustices to women as economic oppression and discrimination, rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment.... One of the strongest and deepest anxieties of most American men is the fear of homosexuality. This homophobia contributes directly to the main injustices experienced by gay men, lesbians and bisexual persons, and it is a debilitating restriction for heterosexual men. We call for an end to all forms of discrimination based on sexual-affective orientation, and for the creation of a gay-affirmative society."

NOMAS members say their goal is to change not just themselves and other men, but also the

that. When we deny others, we deny ourselves. Homophobia is a perfect example. It causes men to be terrified of intimacy with other men, and look at how their lives are severely limited because of that."

Three intensive workshops are slated for July 25: a Men's Studies Institute; a Homophobia Education Institute conducted by Charlie Kreiner, a human liberation advocate; and the Ending Men's Violence Institute, which includes a training led by Tess Wiseheart, executive director of the Portland Women's Crisis Line.

"After 20-plus years working on these issues, I have found that no matter how much we march and lobby, we as women cannot stop sexual and domestic violence all by ourselves," says



State Rep. George Eighmey

institutions that create inequality.

The Men & Masculinity Conference is produced annually through a partnership between NOMAS and a local grass-roots committee, which this year has chosen to explore the issue of justice and visions for the future. Organizers say that "a spiritual mooring is important in the quest for social justice, so you will also find that thread woven through this year's conference."

Panelists will discuss visions of justice that include affirmative action, gay and lesbian concerns, community policing, ending violence and hate crimes and creating community.

Keynote panelists include several local dignitaries and activists including state Reps. Eighmey, Gail Shibley and Kate Brown; Roberto Reyes-Colon; Kathleen Saadat; Portland Police Chief Charles Moose and his wife, Sandra; and Multnomah County Chair Bev Stein.

"NOMAS started in support of the women's movement. It is not reactionary in the way these so-called fathers' and men's rights groups are," says Chris Huffine, 32, a clinical psychologist who runs men's domestic violence groups through The Men's Center in Portland.

Huffine, who serves on the conference's local planning committee, adds, "We realize that men oppress women, men and the earth.... I used to have a bumper sticker that said 'No One Is Free When Others Are Oppressed,' and I truly believe

Wiseheart, a self-described radical lesbian feminist activist.

"My journey, and I think the journey of the crisis line, has led us to ask: 'OK, if that's the case, do we invite men in and hope they will do a good job, or do we train them to make sure they 'get it'?"

Wiseheart has opted for the latter, and says the crisis line offers basic and advanced men-only trainings around sexual and domestic violence issues.

The advanced training informs men how they can support women and nurture each other, rather than expecting women to always do it.

"That's a tough one because of their socially ingrained homophobia. It's OK for men to get their support from women, but not other men. If a man attempts to, there's always the chance that he could have the shit kicked out of him," says Wiseheart, who nevertheless introduces men to the concept (and hopefully practice) of men-on-men nurturing.

"There are lots of men involved in the struggle for human rights," says Kathleen Saadat, who believes it's unfair and detrimental to lump men, white men specifically, together as the purveyors of all oppression.

"All white men are not oppressors. All white men are, are white and men," she says, adding, "I think lots of white men are getting it, and by 'it'

I mean the reality that they are not free from exploitation or oppression.... Men are born into a set of expectations and trained to regard themselves in a certain way. If they don't meet that standard, they feel inferior. Some give up. What we have to do is ask: What is the purpose in placing that much emphasis on gender and gender roles?"

Charlie Kreiner agrees: "Do we want relationships between roles or relationships between people?"

Kreiner believes the current dialogue over same-sex marriage will help dismantle suffocating roles relating to gender and sexual orientation: "It raises huge questions around the purpose of marriage. What makes a relationship? What makes a family?" he says, adding the same is true for the emergence of a more visible transgender/transsexual movement. "It makes us re-examine notions of gender. What is it? Is gender learned, or are there inherent differences? Have we just been conditioned to fulfill a particular role that's been laid out for us?"

The constricting habit of jamming people into roles is not limited to nongays, says Kreiner, who recounts a time when two of his friends—a self-identified lesbian and gay man—got married and procreated via opposite-sex intercourse. All this while still identifying as lesbian and gay.

"The gay community was totally freaked out, and their straight friends kind of scratched their heads wondering what the deal was," says Kreiner. "Everybody but them felt threatened by their life because this couple didn't live up to either community's expectation and proceeded to pursue the freedom to explore."

While men are viewed as the holders of enormous power, many will tell you their day-to-day existence is brain- and heart-numbing: working like a machine (or unemployed and thus not upholding the tenacious persona of Male as Breadwinner), shunned or mocked if they desire or seek any form of intimate contact with other men, rejected for desiring to spend more time with children, encouraged—from practically day one—to one-up each other in sport, job or product.

Yes, there are certain privileges, they say, but the masculine prototype is just as emotionally and physically damaging to them as the pre-feminist-movement feminine one was to women.

"We are entrenched in this culture, so I think in that respect we are all blameless on a certain level," says Alan Winter, 50, publisher of *Mentor*, a Portland-based quarterly magazine "about men and their journey of discovery."

"Men are very alone in many ways," he says. "If the tables were turned and women were oppressing men, maybe they would be able to establish a new ethic, a sense of community, the way many women have because of their collective struggle against oppression."

He adds: "But we have the power to change culture—to change ourselves. We are in the process of redefining ourselves as men, as members of the planet. It is very scary and threatening to many men, much in the way feminism is threatening to them. At the same time, it is tremendously exciting, a tremendous opportunity."

The Men & Masculinity Conference will be held July 25-28 at Lewis & Clark College in Portland. Topics of conference workshops include: Pornography & Politics; Sexual Attraction, Orientation & Gender; Class Privilege; Facing Racism; Intro to PFLAG; and How to Be an Effective Ally for Women. For further information, call 282-2108.

A debate and dialogue, "What Now for Men: Converging and Diverging Paths," featuring Robert Bly and Michael Kimmel, will be held at the campus on July 26 at 8:30 pm. Tickets are \$12 from Fastixx 224-8499, and at the door.